











# AFTER NOON

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"Madame Claire," "Nina," etc.



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## AFTER NOON



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## *Chapter I*

C RISES have a way of thrusting into the limelight hitherto obscure persons, and giving them, for a long or short period, a leading rôle.

This happened to Mrs. Morgan, but, the crisis over, she sank into obscurity again. She was too heavy a body to maintain an elevated position for long. Fate had made her a horrified witness of Mrs. Lester's flight from the Hotel Ampeglio in Rome with a correspondent of one of the London dailies, a Mr. Sweet, whose brief acquaintance with the Lesters had this totally unexpected dénouement.

The Lesters, whom she saw at meal times, or when she was resting after her eternal sight-seeing in the Eternal City, struck her as an ideal young couple. It seemed, altogether, an ideal little family, and the fat girl twins she thought adorable. She admired the handsome Italian nurse. She thought young Mr. Lester—he



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seemed so very young—quite charming in his devotion to the babies and to his wife. Mrs. Lester's clothes and general appearance were admirable. Mr. Sweet, introduced into the little family by Mr. Lester—they had fallen into talk over the morning paper—seemed a suitable adjunct to it. Lonely, stout, warm-hearted Mrs. Morgan took a great interest in them all, but particularly in Mr. Lester, who invariably gave her a pleasant "Good-morning."

Then one day Mrs. Morgan, having returned exhausted from St. Peter's, was resting and knitting in the lounge before lunch. She commanded, from her easy chair, a view of the hall, and she was startled to see Mrs. Lester come in with a high, excited colour and unusual haste, and to see her, after a rapid and impatient conversation with the Manager himself, go hurrying up the stairs as though her very life depended on her exertions; regal, handsome, in a fury, her figure—women had figures then—seeming to expand under the influence of some violent emotion.

Mr. Sweet was leaving that morning for Sicily. Some of his trunks were already waiting in the hall, but to that fact Mrs. Morgan attached, at the moment, no importance at all. She presently saw the nurse come in; saw her lift the babies—a heavy pair—from the pram, which, when not in use, occupied a dark corner of the hall, and saw

her mount the stairs, a sturdy child in each arm.

Half an hour passed. She went on with her knitting. She had observed nothing out of the common except the haste and the high and angry temper of Mrs. Lester. It was nearly lunch time. She was rolling up her sock and fixing the needles in it when the sound of excited voices reached her ears. Mrs. Lester, dressed for travelling, was hurrying down the stairs followed by porters with luggage and by the nurse who was talking furiously. Mrs. Lester was answering her equally furiously in Italian. At the bottom of the stairs the woman thrust her face into that of her employer, uttered some words that will not be found in any handbook of Italian conversation, laughed scornfully, and remounted the stairs. She nearly ran into the tall figure of Mr. Sweet, who was descending them. She shook an angry fist in his face.

Mrs. Morgan's cheeks burned. She was beginning to understand. Her heart beat violently. Sock in hand she went to the window, and there, waiting in the flat, golden April sunlight, stood the station bus. Mrs. Lester's luggage, mixed indiscriminately with Mr. Sweet's luggage, was being hastily piled on the top of it.

She saw the suave Mr. Sweet, unflurried and generous, distribute largesse to the hotel servants. She did not see the Manager, who was doubtless

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keeping out of the way. Mr. Sweet handed Mrs. Lester into the bus, and the door was shut. She saw them both glance up and down the street and at the windows of the hotel. Mrs. Lester's eyes met hers, and she started back from the window, her cheeks scarlet. The driver used his whip and the bus lurched forward out of Mrs. Morgan's sight.

Just four minutes later Charles Lester, carrying a bouquet of roses, entered the hotel. He glanced into the lounge, saw Mrs. Morgan sitting inertly in her chair, said "Good-morning" to her, and went eagerly up the stairs. Mrs. Morgan closed her eyes and trembled.

The next day she became the central figure in that little domestic drama. Unable any longer to maintain silence she told the stricken and white-faced young man that she knew all about it, and that as she was soon returning to England herself, she would gladly accompany him and take care of the babies.

"As for that nurse," she told him, "what I say is, good riddance to bad rubbish."

She was invaluable. He couldn't imagine what he would have done without her on that journey to London. She played the part of nurse and temporary mother to the babies with such ferocious sympathy that Charles, whose sense of humour didn't even then desert him, was genu-

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inely sorry to see the last of her at Victoria Station. She was not only invaluable, she was also, in her way, extremely diverting, and Heaven knew he needed diversion just then.

Yes, he would be all right now, he assured her. He would put the babies to bed the moment he arrived; and, please God, the nurse he had written and wired for would be on hand in the morning. Caroline and Venetia, too tired to cry, were propped up one against the other in a corner of the four-wheeler, which smelt of the stables, while Charles, hat in hand, tried to thank Mrs. Morgan for all she had done for him.

The moment lingered in his memory for years. He remembered the hurrying people, the slamming and banging of train doors, the air—unexpectedly warm for April—full of the choky, acrid smell of engine smoke. He never forgot Mrs. Morgan in her bulky wraps and shapeless hat, with the tears starting from her eyes. She was returning to Aberystwith, and a life made up of small, drab things, a life that would again receive her, after a two-months' sojourn in Rome, entirely unchanged.

"Should I kiss her?" Charles asked himself. The tears had started on their way now, and he looked for a dry place on her cheeks. To kiss her seemed the only way in which he could ade-

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quately thank her, but doubt and shyness and those tears dismissed the impulse.

She begged him not to mention gratitude.

"A woman and a mother," she said, "couldn't have done less."

And they both thought of Brenda, who was both a woman and a mother, and who was now in Sicily with another man.

"You poor, dear boy," she said, and suddenly she lifted up her face and kissed him. Then, flicking a handkerchief from some convenient pocket, she turned away and glanced into the cab to make sure that the babies were not, at the moment, in need of her. Charles put her into her own four-wheeler and she drove off, waving to him and kissing her hand. Her moment was over.

He gave the address to his own driver, and, getting into the cab, carefully lifted a child into each arm. One of them cried a little; he was not sure in the dark which it was; but weariness soon overcame them again, and they slumbered peacefully enough against his coat. They were hardly aware, as yet, of life's changes. Comfort and discomfort were so far their most poignant experiences.

And as the cab trundled through the familiar streets, Charles, for the hundredth time since the



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day Brenda left him, looked back and reviewed his life.

He had not wanted or intended to marry at twenty-one. He had been married by one of those women to whom love and even marriage are only adventures, and, at the same time, the only adventures. She bore the romantic name of Brenda Mocatta, and was a middle-class exotic of surprising good looks who lived at Sydenham, within a mile of the Crystal Palace. Her father was a well-to-do bicycle manufacturer, and had never attempted to deny her anything she wanted. When she was twenty-five he died, and she found herself an orphan, an heiress, and something of a beauty, and she despised her surroundings. She wanted to marry a gentleman, and considered that there were none among her acquaintances.

One warm summer day she and Charles shared a third-class compartment—she preferred travelling third because she always found people to talk to—on their way to Devonshire. Charles was going to visit his mother who had a cottage near Paignton; Brenda was going to try her luck at Torquay. They fell into conversation over a book that Brenda was reading and that Charles condemned. It was called *The Mighty Atom*. Charles was the first "clever" man who had come her way. She was impressed by his original and emphatically stated opinions, and by his ease of



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manner. He talked to her freely, treating her, she thought, almost like another man. A thrill of excitement ran through her when he doubted the existence of an all-wise and all-seeing Providence. This she felt was dangerous and rather wicked, and to her it was altogether new. There were other kinds of wickedness to which she had accustomed herself. She had always believed that she might, at some very remote date, be punished for certain shortcomings of her own, but that time seemed so far off that she rarely troubled herself about it. Also she meant, before that date, to turn over an entirely new leaf, and this change of heart could not, she felt, but be gratifying to the Higher Power which she had been taught to fear and to placate.

But here was a young man who didn't believe in a Heaven and rewards and punishments all round, and yet seemed willing to practise virtue for its own sake. She found him a fascinating puzzle.

She asked him if he were related to Sir Bindon Lester, whose books she had been reluctantly obliged to study at school. He said that Sir Bindon was his father's brother.

"And are you a naturalist too?" she asked.

Charles said that one naturalist in the family was enough. He himself was a proof reader in a small publishing house. She gasped when he

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told her what his salary was. Surely, she said, he didn't mean to go on living like that. Hadn't he any ambition? Why, that wasn't living at all.

"At the moment," said the youthful Charles, "I am perfectly satisfied. I'm only twenty, and what I earn is enough for my present needs. My mother has an annuity and a hundred a year from my uncle. So we've no worries."

Brenda thought this showed a lamentable lack of spirit and said so, and they argued about ambition as young people will until the end of the journey cut their argument short. She asked Charles if he would come and lunch with her at Torquay, and named a day, for she had no intention of letting him slip out of her life, as, left to himself, he would have done.

He went, and was startled by the magnificence with which she was surrounded. She was staying at the best hotel in Torquay, under the nominal chaperonage of an invalid aunt who had a companion nurse, and took her meals in her room. Charles never met this lady, though her name, then and after, was often on Brenda's lips.

That lunch, a lunch in which champagne and early grouse played their brief and expensive part, must have cost her, Charles reckoned, over three pounds. It made him very thoughtful.

"This won't do," he told himself, after a third

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visit, and, not satisfied with telling himself, he told her. She saw that he was about to withdraw, honourably, from her life, and at once opened her attack. He was astounded, and, for he was very young, immensely flattered by her determination to place herself and her wealth at his disposal. She saw in him a young and agreeable companion: well-mannered, unversed as yet in love, of good appearance, capable, with money behind him, of becoming everything she desired in a husband.

She was very handsome with her flashing brown eyes and her high colour. She brushed aside all his perfectly sincere objections, and with creditable insight into his character she pointed out to him the smallness, and—yes—the vulgarity of making money a barrier to love.

“A man with ideas like yours,” she said, taunting and flattering him in one breath, “ought to be able to ignore money, or at least give it its proper value. It seems to me you’re making a terrific to-do about a thing you pretend to despise.”

For Charles had “advanced” views, and even in those days spoke of her money as “unearned increment.” But her warmth, her generosity, her passion, overwhelmed him. It seemed useless and absurd to struggle against what seemed to be so obviously and so fortunately his fate. More-

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over, he was deeply in love, and she was five years his senior. In the end she won.

She hid nothing of her past from him, and he admired her for her honesty, for twenty years ago few women had the courage to be honest about themselves. They married, he at twenty-one, Brenda at twenty-six, and went to Italy for their honeymoon. And in Italy they remained, as Brenda considered it the right setting for such a love as theirs, for nearly four years, without once returning to England. She was a silly, romantic woman, seen with a coldly discerning eye, and she consumed and exploited Charles, and did her best to tame him completely. For three years he was feverishly happy, but restlessness and discontent began in the fourth year. The twins were born in Florence, but Venetia was named after the city in which they spent the early part of their honeymoon.

As babies they interested Charles very little, although their physical welfare was always of great importance to him. His love for them, he knew, would come later. Meanwhile, an Italian nurse took charge of them, and it was over this nurse that he and Brenda had their first disagreement. He wanted an English nurse for the children; Brenda wanted nothing English except an English husband. She was in love with Italy and wanted to italianise herself and all of them, and

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Charles's longing for England and for work and for a settled home exasperated her. She had had enough of Sydenham, and of all Sydenham had meant to her, and to her England, in retrospect, seemed one vast Sydenham. She wanted, and she meant to have, a villa in Florence and a flat in Rome. "And after all," she now began to ask, "whose money is it?"

It was the inevitable question.

But Charles, infatuated though he still was, made one day for the first and last time a stand. He made it, literally enough, in front of Cook's offices in Rome. He implored Brenda to agree to his going in and buying tickets for England, for all of them. It was time that they gave up this aimless wandering about the Continent. He said it was demoralising.

She laughed at him. She was not a quarrelsome woman. They had never had a real quarrel. She only laughed and said:

"Don't be a fool, Charles. You know perfectly well I've no intention of going back to England."

"I tell you I mean to buy those tickets here and now," he warned her, angry and desperate.

She looked strangely at him.

"You really mean that?"

"I do."

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"You'll be sorry for this," she said quietly, and walked away, leaving him standing there.

He looked after her, expecting to see her turn and come back and say: "Oh, very well then . . ." But she did nothing of the sort. She stepped instead into an open cab that was passing, and drove away, out of his sight.

He bought the tickets—and with Brenda's money. He knew he was doing the right thing, but that he could only do the right thing in the wrong way—with money that was not really his—made him feel, for the first time, heartily sick of that state of affairs.

She'd give in, he felt certain, now that the tickets were actually bought. She'd give in and they'd go back to England and perhaps take a house in the country somewhere, near London, and he'd get a job. Work—he longed for work. He wanted to be able to make Brenda a present that she wouldn't eventually pay for. He saw himself buying a pony for the children. He made up his mind to earn, in the near future, a salary of at least a thousand a year.

"A job and a thousand a year," he told himself humorously, vexed and unhappy though he was, "will make an honest man of me."

This life that he'd been living, he decided, had been playing hell with his moral fibre. Now that he had the tickets in his pocket he dreaded re-



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turning to the hotel and facing Brenda. Instead he walked the streets for nearly an hour, wondering how he might best placate her. In the end he bought a bunch of fine roses at a florist's and turned his steps rapidly toward the Ampeglio.

He found the time-honoured note waiting for him, written in such haste or in such a fury, or both, that he could barely read it. She had gone off with Leonard Sweet. He understood then her recent enthusiasm for Titian, Correggio and Tintoretto, and her frequent visits to the galleries. She said that if he wanted domesticity in England he must have it with someone else. She had given him the best years of his life and paid for them too, and as he felt he couldn't make the least sacrifice for her, she was going away with someone who could and would. She didn't feel at all ashamed of what she was doing. She enclosed a cheque for a hundred pounds.

I know you'll be good to the babies. Divorce me or not, as you like. I don't care. You don't want to lead my life, and I certainly won't lead yours. Good-bye.

BRENDA.

She had acted with a consistency that was almost admirable. Charles's logical mind perceived—until pain swamped all thought—that she had done exactly as she might have been expected to do. As is usually the case with blows of great

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suddenness and violence, he merely felt numb at first, and wondered that he suffered so little. But within an hour he was nearly mad with the pain of his own thoughts—a pain that was increased and inflamed by the feeling that he ought, properly, to pursue them and bring her back; that he ought, properly, to kill, or try to kill, Leonard Sweet. In Italy, especially, such acts were expected of a man in his position.

But he soon dealt firmly with these doubts. He had, first of all, to think of his children. Whatever happened, he had no intention of leaving them in the sole charge of the swarthy Adelina, whom he had never liked or trusted. He sent for her. She was full of voluble pity. The Signor could trust her with everything. Her heart bled for the Signor. She would love the little ones now not only as a nurse but as a mother. She would devote her life to them. Her black rolling eyes had too much meaning in them. Charles, disgusted and alarmed, paid her a month's wages in advance and told her he no longer needed her, as he was returning to England with the children at once, and alone.

She became abusive then; she jeered and taunted him, and called him names, and made horns with her fingers. He had to accelerate her departure by the threat of the police.

It was then that Mrs. Morgan made her nicely

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timed entry. She took the babies under her wing and gave Charles a chance to make preparations for the journey, and for their arrival in London. He was so busy during the day that he had no time to think of Brenda, but at night he lay awake and stared at the dark with wide, sleepless eyes.

He was only twenty-four—a boy still. It seemed to him incredible that such a thing should have happened to him. His experience, his knowledge of life before marriage had been very slight, and since his marriage his life had been too unusual, too romantic, to prepare him for any such catastrophe.

He didn't tell himself that she had left him for a grand passion. She had left him, he believed, for a man who would, for a few years at least, do exactly what she wanted him to do; for a newer and, therefore, more tractable lover.

For nearly four years he and Brenda had been all in all to each other. The tremendous intimacy of love and marriage that, he supposed in his inexperience, welded two people into one, had done nothing of the sort. It had left two people what they were before—entirely separate beings, pulling, as often as not, in opposite directions. The tie that he had thought unbreakable had snapped like a bit of worn silk. Even the begetting of children had made no difference. It was incredibly awful, incredibly disillusioning. Mar-

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riage . . . motherhood . . . fatherhood . . . all these things that he had thought sacred meant nothing.

No, he argued, that wasn't true. Fatherhood meant something. Those fat twin girls were his now. His to keep for ever. They depended utterly now on him. Thinking of this, his pain grew less. He lay there, staring into the dark, alone for the first time since his marriage, and made plans. And making these plans he no longer saw Brenda with her eager, over-warm brown eyes, and the curves of her full figure; he no longer saw Sweet with his suave, languid manner, his smooth hair and drooping moustache; he concentrated his mind instead upon himself and upon the children. He would have his work cut out for him, and he wasn't going to ask for help from anybody. They were his; they must depend on him. He wanted them to depend on him.

"I'll get a good nurse for them in England," he said to himself. "But I'm damned if any other woman is going to interfere. I'll accept Mrs. Morgan's help for the present, but after that I'll manage alone."

He had cause to thank Heaven for Mrs. Morgan's help, even while he found her pity a little trying. It embarrassed him and made him feel that he was very much in the position of a betrayed and deserted woman—the victim, in fact,

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of a vulgar seduction. A hideous thought. But Brenda had been so much the aggressor, the active one, that the comparison was painfully true.

And then it presently struck him that the situation was full of a mordant sort of comedy, and he laughed. To be the father, at twenty-four, of motherless twin girls is not the lot of many young men. He forgave Mrs. Morgan for her lack of tact, and decided to regard the whole situation as humourous. It was a good substitute for his feelings of the night, feelings that seemed heroic and rather ridiculous when seen by the light of day. He'd pull through somehow, and meanwhile it really was somewhat comic.

Between those moments outside Cook's offices and his arrival at Lancaster Gate he purged himself of much that had been a part of his life. He saw that if he had been a year or two older when Brenda had crossed his path he could have withstood her. He had been the victim of his own youth, and neither in the future nor at that moment need he blame himself unduly.

"And after all," he told himself as the four-wheeler trundled over the Serpentine Bridge, "to have been for nearly four years a combination of courier and hired husband to an adventuress ought to teach a man something."

Venetia—he thought it was Venetia—stirred in his arms.

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"You're in England now," he said, holding her closer, "where you belong. Before you're much older you'll come and play under these very trees. And I'll buy you a little dog and pay for it myself."

At the sight of Lancaster Gate, however, gloomy and dim in the lamplight, some of his elation departed from him. He remembered the palace in Florence where they had had a flat one winter. He thought of the sunshine and the tulips of Rome. But it was England, all the same, and they wouldn't live in Lancaster Gate in a boarding-house recommended by Mrs. Morgan for ever.

A woman of awful gentility welcomed them in the hall—but not too warmly, for her bed time was ten o'clock, and it was now long after, and the vagaries of the Channel did not exist for her. It was a monstrous house, and solemn, with high ceilings, badly lighted rooms, draughty stone passages, odorous flickering gas behind coloured globes, aspidistras, and shiny oil paintings in heavy gilt frames.

A man like a black beetle emerged from below stairs to carry up the trunks, and Charles, weary and burdened though he was, couldn't help wondering what that man's life was like, if he were married or single, and if he found existence tolerable or wholly bad.



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Miss FitzHerbert—pictures of her probable ancestors and the decline of some branch of them flashed through Charles's mind—led him upstairs, carrying the sleeping children in his arms. Their rooms were on the third floor: a large front room for children and nurse, and a narrow slice of a room at the back for himself. The children's and nurse's meals would be served in their room; Charles would, of course, take his meals in the public dining-room.

"We have only the very nicest people here," Miss FitzHerbert told him. "Ladies and gentlemen, as you will see for yourself. Only last week a cousin of Lady Montcalm's left me, after a stay of nane years. She could hardly bear to say good-baye."

"All I want," said Charles concisely, as he laid the babies on the bed, "is clean rooms, good plain food, and not too many extras on the bills."

He began to struggle with buttons, tapes and pins. Miss FitzHerbert did not offer to help him. She said "Good-nate," showing false teeth of amazing size and regularity, and went away, upstairs or downstairs, to some dark eerie of her own, to which Charles's mind did not follow her.

## *Chapter II*

**C**HARLES LESTER ascended the steps of his house in Eaton Gardens, not far from Eaton Square, and opened the dark blue door with his latchkey. It was Saturday and two-thirty, and a most unpleasant March day. The gusty wind seemed to take pleasure in sweeping dust and bits of paper into corners and down area steps only to whisk them out the next moment and distribute them about the streets again.

He was glad to be indoors, out of the cold. He had lunched at his favourite chop house in the City, and now returned home, agreeably conscious of having about forty hours ahead of him in which to read, to sleep, and to probe, with a delight that never palled, the different and changing minds of his daughters, Caroline and Venetia, the gradual exfoliation of whose natures was to him a perpetual drama.

As he entered the narrow, white-painted hall he smelt the warm and homely smell of something cooking slowly in a pot—something that had been cunningly and thoughtfully put together. In that small house it seemed impossible to suppress these

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odours, but Charles had no objection to the smell of cooking when it was cooking of such excellent quality. After closing the front door he stood listening. He heard no voices, and when Caroline and Venetia were at home the house was agreeably vocal.

He went to the door that led to the basement and, opening it, he called down to Marie, the cook-general imported by him from Normandy: "Where are the young ladies?"

They were out, she told him in French, coming to the foot of the stairs, so that Charles looked down upon a great bust and a small black head on which the hair was tightly drawn back. They had not said they would be in to tea, but they had not said they would not be in to tea. She thought it possible they might be.

Charles never spoke French to Marie, and she never spoke English to him. Her English was reserved for tradesmen and callers, Charles's French for the translation of his favourite authors.

He took off his coat and hat and hung them in a cupboard concealed in the panelled wall. He then entered his own small library at the back of the house. There were only two rooms on each floor, and only three floors and a basement. The basement contained a kitchen, a scullery, and a pantry, and Marie's bedroom, which looked out,

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though somewhat below its level, on the garden. On the ground floor were the dining-room and Charles's library; on the floor above, the drawing-room and his bedroom; and on the top floor were the girls' rooms. The front windows looked on to a quiet street and a row of neat houses, all of which were of a pleasant age and appearance, being Georgian, and each of which had a certain individuality. The back rooms overlooked the small walled garden, in which grew a fig tree of no mean size, whose bare bones showed no signs whatever of being touched to life by the approach of spring.

He was not really sorry that the girls were out, because it meant that he could put in some uninterrupted work on his modern prose anthology before tea. He was amusing himself, and had been for years, by culling what he considered the finest passages from the writings of modern English, American and French authors. Whether this anthology would or would not eventually reach the public was to him a matter of little moment. The work delighted him and gave zest to his reading. There is in most of us a secret longing, of which we are ashamed, to read with a pencil in our hands. Charles could indulge this vice with an object. He annotated with enthusiasm.

The room was in some confusion, as he liked it. and in the middle of it, with scarcely enough

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room for a generously planned human being to pass between it and the wall, was a large old-fashioned writing-table, on which were piled a great number of books, and these books were already encroaching upon the clearing at which Charles sat, with pens, ink and paper before him.

The room was panelled like the hall, and its only ornaments were books, a few prints, and a pair of handsome Chelsea figures on the mantelpiece. The fire was already burning brightly in a grate set corner-wise in the wall, but he gave it a little attention before he sat down because he didn't want to think about it again for an hour or two.

Charles was not at all a handsome man, a fact which he spent no time in regretting. He had an alert, amused look, and it was easy to see that he had never, in spite of his forty-two years, taken himself too seriously. He had almost no vanity whatever, and considered himself an ugly fellow, but didn't care, because of his conviction that looks were of no importance in men, and of theoretical unimportance in women. He distrusted sentiment; he distrusted bombast, or any utterances of a high moral tone; he even, at times, distrusted beauty. He was of so generous and open a mind, however, that he was not sure he ought to be glad he distrusted these things. Except where cruelty or injustice were concerned, he was

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incapable of moral indignation. Here again he would admit, if attacked, that he might be wrong, but at any rate it was so. He was as he was; he did not pride himself on the fact. But in spite of his tolerance there was an odd streak of Puritanism in him, and there would have been more but for his sense of the ridiculous. One sign of his Puritanism was that almost the only prettiness that did not seem to him meretricious was the prettiness of his own daughters.

The prettiness of Venetia was very apparent when she came in at five. She was dressed in tweeds, and was one of those slim, soft, graceful girls that the young twentieth century seems to love to fashion. She was long-limbed and looked fragile, and yet her staying powers were tremendous. Thirty-six holes of golf did not tire her unduly, nor did late hours keep her in bed in the mornings. She liked wine with her dinner, and very often a cocktail before it, but not more than one. She drank and smoked in natural moderation. Her skin was exquisite, her eyes very clear and innocent-looking; and although her lips well knew the touch of the red pencil, they scarcely needed it. She was impulsive, affectionate, greedy for love, and very much aware of her charms, which she sought to increase by every means known to woman.

She came in rubbing her chilled fingers. She



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had had a glorious day, she said, playing golf, but the drive home in a small open car had nearly frozen her.

She leaned across the table and the piled-up books to kiss Charles.

"Where were you playing?" he asked. What he really wanted to know was with whom she had been playing, but he never asked direct questions. It was his policy to refrain from doing so.

"At Stoke, with Frank Stoddard. He always insists on giving me a stroke a hole, and of course I always beat him unless I'm terribly off my game. He's got mistaken ideas of chivalry. It was fun, though." She edged her narrow body between the end of the table and the wall and stood behind him, with her back to the fire. "Would you like me to go away?"

"Not a bit. I've done a good two hours' work."

"Thanks. It's nice and warm in here, and I'm chilled to the bone."

"Tell Marie to bring you up some tea. I've had mine."

"I'll wait and see if Caroline comes in." She took a cigarette out of a box at Charles's elbow and lit it. "Do you know where she is?"

Charles turned about in his chair so that he could see her. "I haven't a notion. I didn't know where you were."

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"Did you want to, particularly?"

"No. You're almost twenty-one, and marriageable. I only hope you've been making the most of your time."

She smiled. "You don't hope anything of the sort. You live in terror of our getting married. But I do think Caroline might tell me her plans."

"Oh, I don't know. Why should she?"

"Why? Because she's my twin sister. And because I tell her things."

"Well, there never were twins less alike," observed Charles.

"I know," Venetia agreed. "It's a pity. I mean it's a pity Caroline isn't more like me, not a pity I'm not more like Caroline."

Her father retorted, "You think Caroline's odd because she doesn't like young men to kiss her in taxis coming home from dances, and you do."

She seized his shoulders. "What a beast you are, father! After this I'll never tell you anything."

"But I think it's so right of you," he protested. "So natural and human. Caroline's indifference to young men alarms me."

"Besides," said Venetia, who was not at all indignant, because she loved discussing herself, particularly in relation to young men, "I don't let

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just anyone kiss me. If they're not terribly nice I growl and draw back, I assure you."

"If they're not terribly nice you oughtn't to be in a taxi with them at all. What other reasons have you for being glad you're not like Caroline?"

"I can't bear her friends. I think they're poisonous."

"That's because you don't agree with their politics. I do agree with their politics—or as much as I agree with any."

"Yes, exactly," she cried. "It's all right for you. You stand outside and look on at everything. You forget that Caroline doesn't. She plunges in up to her neck. And if you ask me I think she's out of her depth at this very minute."

Charles's hand strayed to his hair and began twisting a lock of it into a curl or spiral, so that it stood up, horn-like, and gave him a very odd and wild appearance.

"I wish you wouldn't hint at dark things," he protested. "I hope I've taught you both to swim. I've tried to."

"Oh, you think you've brought us up too *marvellously*," she burst out, with the absurd emphasis of her day and age.

He began to see that she was struggling with a grievance.

She had a complaint to lodge, and she was look-

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ing for a convenient place in which to lodge it. He knew that he would soon hear what it was, for it was not Venetia's habit to suppress her feelings for long.

He answered after a moment's thought: "I don't think I've done so badly, all things considered."

"Well, then, let me tell you," she cried, well under way now, "that I've either had to unlearn all the things you've taught me or else begin learning all the things you never taught me because you thought they were useless or out of date. But Caroline, on the contrary, has just swallowed everything whole, and the result is she's suffering from indigestion."

Charles, somewhat startled by this sudden assault, nevertheless answered with faint irony: "I understood that she was drowning a moment ago."

"It's both," said Venetia, not at all disconcerted. "Indigestion causes cramp, and cramp causes drowning."

"But this," said Charles, twirling his lock of hair, "is a damned serious charge you've brought against me. What I've taught you you've had to discard, and what I've taught Caroline has been bad for her. I'd like you to explain more fully."

There was a moment's silence before Venetia answered: "Well, just for instance, since you

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ask me, take the fact that you never had us baptised and never encouraged us to be confirmed. That you brought us up exactly like little heathens."

She hesitated.

"Well?" Charles prompted her.

"I told Frank Stoddard about it to-day, and he was simply horrified."

"Was he indeed? Then be baptised now. There's nothing to prevent it. Besides, what the devil has Frank Stoddard got to do with it?"

She pulled off her small felt hat and smoothed her hair with her hands. It was fine brown hair of a soft and silky quality, and was done in a small knot at the back of her head.

"He hasn't anything to do with it, naturally. I'm just telling you that he was horrified. I'm ashamed to tell people as a rule. It sounds so utterly pagan. And I've decided that I want to be both baptised and confirmed."

"Well, so you shall. Isn't it better to do it when the spirit moves you than to have it done to you before you can think for yourself?"

"I don't know. It's very unusual."

"But, good God, Venetia," he cried, "when did you ever know me to be influenced by what was usual, or what was unusual?"

"It's all very well," she retorted, "you can have original views for yourself, if you like, but

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I don't think you ought to thrust them on your children. I've been turning things over in my mind lately . . ."

"Which is just what I hoped you'd do," he interrupted.

"And I've decided that it was a great mistake not to have given us any religious teaching at all."

"I taught you everything that I thought you ought to know, and nothing that I didn't believe myself."

"Well, the Church wouldn't recognise it as religious teaching."

"That may be—I can't help that. I left you free to make your own choice in these matters. I respected your spiritual liberty. I considered that it was unfair to prejudice the mind of a child at its most impressionable age. I told you that there was most probably a God, but that I knew very little about His nature. I said He might possibly be a force, like electricity, but was most certainly a good force. I said this force had from time to time its interpreters. I said that people discovered this force, or this God, in different ways, and that you might find Him in the Bible, or in Science, or in a garden some morning about sunrise. I left the finding of Him to you. I don't see that I could honestly have said more than I did."

He added, as Venetia was silent:



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"As for morality, I tried to teach you that morals should be ruled or regulated by a love of virtue for its own sake, and not by fear. Most religions rule by fear. I don't approve of that, for people who are capable of thought."

"What I mean is . . ." she began, but Charles had not yet done.

"And as for Frank Stoddard . . ." He broke off. He had had a sudden flash of insight. "As for Frank Stoddard, I bet you what you like he's thinking of becoming a parson. Am I right?"

Venetia pulled at the bow of ribbon that trimmed her hat.

"Yes," she said, "he is. Why not?"

"Ah," said Charles, "I thought so. Do get another young man, Venetia. Frank needs counteracting."

She ignored this.

"I've been finding out lately," she said, "that Christianity means a tremendous lot to me. I used to take it for granted, just as I took the London Police Force for granted. The world seems such a tidy, well-ordered sort of place when you're very young. But now that I find it's threatened—Christianity, I mean—I realise I'd do anything to defend it. I believe I'd die for it."

"You and Caroline," said their father wonderingly, "think differently about everything. It's quite extraordinary."

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"I know. Caroline scoffs at religion. I think it's a pretty cheap thing to do—to scoff."

"You haven't a scoffing mind," said Charles. "I'm delighted that you want to be baptised and confirmed, my darling. I'll help you in any way that I can. But I wish it had been an inner voice urging you instead of that indifferent golfer."

He glanced up at her, his eyes twinkling, but he received no answering smile from her. He noticed how serene and white her forehead looked, and he thought as he admired her neat short nose and the curves of her mouth and chin:

"There'll always be a man at the back of all her enthusiasms."

But her eyes, when they met his, had the beginnings of tears in them.

He exclaimed: "Venetia, my darling, what is it?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . you make fun of things so. Frank Stoddard asked me to marry him to-day."

"I thought as much." He gave no sign of the stab of pain in his heart. "Well, would you like to?"

"I don't know. I don't believe I want to, really. I know I don't."

"Proposals are always upsetting, I notice," said Charles in order to give her time to tell him more. "Caroline's only had one that I know of,

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but, as you probably remember, she mooned about the house for days."

Venetia nodded and, turning her head aside, she furtively removed a tear from the corner of her eye with her handkerchief.

"Do you imagine you're in love with him?" Charles persisted. "Because I don't believe for one moment that you are."

She cried impatiently: "No, no, of course I'm not. But men are always so horribly attractive when they tell you they love you. More than they are at any other time. I said I thought I was just fond of him, but not the marrying sort of fond."

"I see. Did you kiss him?"

He asked this, she knew, less as a parent than as an amused and interested onlooker. It made it possible for her to talk to him.

"Oh, no," she answered. "As he's going into the Church I felt I must just settle things one way or the other, and no nonsense of that sort."

In spite of his anxiety he laughed inwardly at this.

"My darling, you'd hate being the wife of a parson. It's not your line at all."

"No," she agreed, "I don't think it is. But he does attract me very much in some ways. He's so wonderfully good, and so certain of everything."

"A robust young parson," mused Charles.

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"*Mens sana* and all that. My dear, how tired you'd get of it. Besides, he's been upsetting you. He oughtn't to care a damn whether you've been baptised or not. I've no use for young men who talk about their souls or yours. He's an ass."

"It's no good your saying he's an ass," said Venetia, "because he isn't. He's exceedingly intelligent."

"The term 'ass' is withdrawn," said Charles generously. "Now ask Marie to bring you some tea. I don't think Caroline's coming."

"In a minute." She drew a stool towards her with her foot, and sank down on it. "I feel horribly depressed now. When I was playing golf I was perfectly happy."

"You had a young man with you then," said her father.

She thought it better to ignore this.

"I really do feel depressed. Existence seems perfectly blank and pointless at the moment. I think life's a rotten business."

"Well," said Charles, "one of the things I always tried to hammer into your heads was that the illusion of illusions is man's pathetic and innate and groundless belief that he is born to be happy, and to have pleasure."

"Yes, I know. All the same, if one's depressed, one's depressed, and that's all there is to it.

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Everything seems futile. I feel in the depths. I think I'll go to bed."

"For heaven's sake," implored Charles, "have some tea, or even something stronger."

She shook her head.

"Well, you're making a mistake," he told her. "I think sometimes the whole difference between contentment and a desire to commit suicide is a glass of port."

"It would take more than tea or port," she began, but got no further, for the telephone bell cut in with shattering abruptness. She put out an arm and lifted it from the table.

"I think it's probably for me," she said. She held the receiver on her knee. Charles saw that there were undried tears still on her lashes.

"Hello. Hello. Yes . . . Yes, this is Venetia Lester speaking. Who is it? No, I don't know. I never do know voices. Oh, it's you, Clive. How are you? It's ages since I saw you. Yes, I know you have. Oh, nothing very special. Just the usual sort of thing. To-night? No, I'm not. Oh, that would be heavenly. Yes, I'd love to. All right. Oh, bother! It'll have to be that same old black dress I wore the last time. Never mind. Yes, at eight. What fun. Good-bye, Clive."

She hung up the receiver, a smile still on her lips, and placed the telephone on the table again.

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Her cheeks were bright. She was all animation now, and sparkle.

"That was Clive Cary. He's just back from Gibraltar. He wants me to dine and dance to-night at the Berkeley. I was longing for something to happen. That's my glass of port. I feel a different woman." She passed a hand over Charles's head in order to make that tortured lock lie down, and added: "Thank Heaven I'm young and not bad-looking."

"You hate yourself, don't you?" inquired Charles.

"No, not at the moment. Only I've got to shorten that dress. I think I'll go up and do it now."

She paused, on the edge of departure, her hat, coat and gloves in her hands.

"You won't have to dine alone. Caroline's sure to be in to dinner. I'll just tell Marie."

"Well, anyway," Charles said as she turned to go, "Cary won't talk to you about your soul. Souls don't trouble these young soldiers much."

She smiled at him gaily.

"I'd almost forgotten about my dear little soul myself," she said. Then he heard her calling down to Marie:

"There'll only be two for dinner, Marie. I'm going out. And I don't want any tea."

She went running up the stairs, her depression



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forgotten. Charles sat smiling to himself. He needn't have been anxious about Frank Stoddard. He needn't be anxious about any of them. The charming absurdity of his daughter amused and delighted him. Her absurdity was all the more pleasing because she knew she was being absurd. Her sense of humour in this respect was to be relied upon. She was continually amused at herself. At the same time, her moods, while they lasted, were real enough. He knew he would hear more of her religious uncertainties. She was suffering from doubts—doubts as to whether agnosticism suited her or not. He considered that doubts meant growth, and growth must have its painful, its disturbing moments. His education of them might be as faulty as she had just said, but at any rate he had encouraged them to think for themselves.

He returned to his task, that task that ran parallel to his daily work as a little river runs beside a railway. He was a chartered accountant in the City, and he found that pleasant river a necessity. He had tried in those early days, when he first returned to London, to get back his old job as proof reader—that job that Brenda had laughed at—but it was fortunate for him that his place was filled, for Mr. Rupert Hinkson, of Hinkson and Lang, publishers, remembering a time when Charles had temporarily acted as clerk

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in the firm's accountancy department, and acquitted himself notably well, sent him to his brother, Mr. Leopold Hinkson, of Hinkson and Rogers, chartered accountants, to whom, after passing his examinations, he presently became articulated.

At the end of four years he became managing clerk. At the end of seven years he was made junior partner. The firm was now Hinkson and Lester, and Mr. Hinkson, who was ageing fast, left the greater part of the business to Charles.

To nearly everyone there is some art or science which seems clear and simple, and is a reward and a consolation in itself. To Charles figures were always amenable and friendly. He was happy and on good terms with them. Accountancy problems were as interesting to him as any other problems. They suited his impartial mind. On the other hand, he had a morbid dread of becoming dry and professional. It was a business that gave individuality little play, and he had a horror of conforming to any pattern.

"If all chartered accountants were photographed, and the photographs superimposed on one another," Charles once said, "I would do violence to myself if the result resembled me."

But his anthology and the amusing activities of his daughters kept his mind fresh. It sometimes amazed him to realise how contented he

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was. There was nothing he really wanted, he often told himself, except possibly a car, and a week-end cottage in the country.

He never ceased to be thankful that the restless, tigerish, implacable Brenda had left him. Sometimes when he was speaking at a shareholders' meeting, or explaining to some tyro the intricacies of accounts, the thought would flash through his mind: "Suppose I'd given in and stayed? Suppose we'd still been together? Good God!"

He had come to believe that he didn't like women very much, and although he was attracted to them at times, he persuaded himself that they were, with very few exceptions, unscrupulous. He took care that none should gain an ascendancy over him. He wanted his life to continue to be very orderly, without complications. He had begun it so feverishly that he had since fallen in love with sanity and peace, and he was convinced that they were the only things worth having.

As for happiness, that elusive something that slipped through one's fingers like a little silver fish, he got it sometimes from a line of poetry, or from the sound of the girls' voices, or from the rose-coloured look of the winter sun through the bare, bluish trees of the park; at times, even from ledgers. . . .

He was looking through the three volumes of

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Amiel's *Diary* for some passages he had marked when the telephone bell rang again.

It was probably Clive Cary, he thought, ringing up to say he would be five minutes late or five minutes early. It was the fatuous sort of thing Venetia's young men sometimes did. But the voice that answered his was a woman's voice, and one that he had never heard before.

There were few women with whom he had ever been on telephoning terms, and there now remained only two—Mrs. Mallison and Miss Brewer, the artist. There had been in the past various ladies who were in the habit of ringing up to ask him to dine, or to ask why he hadn't been to see them, and if they had unwittingly offended him in any way; or possibly to ask if Venetia or Caroline would come to lunch with their daughters. But few of these ladies had been able to endure the rigours of his anti-social nature, and none had, what the lady who now addressed him had, an American accent.

She wished to speak to him, Mr. Charles Lester. She seemed surprised that he had never heard of her.

"Won't you repeat your name?" asked Charles, at a loss. "I don't think I can have heard it correctly."

"Chalmers. Lydia Chalmers. Mrs. Chalmers. Didn't Mr. Hinkson write you about me?"

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"No. He didn't. Which Mr. Hinkson?"

He felt he was being incredibly stupid.

"Oh," the voice was faintly impatient, "Mr. Rupert Hinkson, the publisher. He's just been in America, and I've been seeing a lot of him. When he heard I was coming to England he said I must meet you. He said he would write, and made me promise to ring you up."

"I've never heard a word from him since he left England," said Charles. "But I expect the letter is on the way. Can't I . . . ?"

"But how very queer," he heard her say. "He told me he was writing weeks ago. I wouldn't have dreamt of ringing up otherwise. I'm so sorry. I feel I've . . ."

"But I'm delighted," cried Charles, with affected heartiness, for it seemed to him that this Mrs. Chalmers was feeling rebuffed, and ill at ease. "You can give me news of Mr. Hinkson, perhaps. How is he?"

Thus encouraged, she said he was very well and had been enjoying his stay in America. He was sailing for England soon, she thought. He had said such nice things about Mr. Lester and his daughters . . . it was really most annoying about that letter.

"Never mind the letter," said Charles. "I think it's exceedingly kind of you to ring me up.

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Bother the letter! Tell me, are you over here alone? And how long are you staying?"

"Yes, I'm alone," she answered. "I don't know how long I shall stay. It depends, of course . . . I've been in England once before, quite a long time ago."

"Where are you?" he asked.

"I'm at the Berkeley. After you've had the letter and seen what Mr. Hinkson has to say about me, perhaps you'll call and see me one day."

"Confound these rich women!" Charles was thinking. He said aloud: "But can't I come before that?" Mr. Hinkson had been a good friend to him. He owed him much. "Couldn't I come in this evening, after dinner?"

"Oh, that would be delightful," she answered.

"Very well," said Charles. "About nine, or half-past, if that would suit you."

"Perhaps old Rupert is in love with her," he thought, "and wants me to look her over. These elderly widowers are always cautious."

Mrs. Chalmers said that would suit her perfectly, and Charles said, "Good-bye" firmly, for he had a horror of the dragging and ragged ends of telephone conversations, and hung up the receiver.

"This is perfectly astounding," he said to himself.

Rupert Hinkson's long, equine face rose up be-



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fore him, and at the same time he saw the purplish face and portly figure of Mrs. Rupert, dead seven years now. Rupert had been inconsolable, and so far unconsolated. That he should now, at sixty-four, begin to interest himself in a rich and probably pretty widow—he visualised her as such—struck Charles as highly amusing.

But why, he asked himself, was he thinking of her as a widow? She might—it was frequently done—have left her husband behind in America. Or she might, of course, be a divorcée.

Lydia Chalmers. No, he saw mourning round her, as the fortune-tellers say.

“I pictured a pretty woman in black. If I’m right I’ve had a moment of clairvoyance.”

It was a promising name, Lydia Chalmers. The Lydia reminded him of a heroine in one of Mr. Henry James’s novels. Charles, who knew few American women, was apt to see them through the eyes of Mr. Henry James, who was a favourite author of his. A great many passages by that writer were finding their way into his anthology. Mrs. Chalmers was probably pretty, rich, intelligent, and cold. Rich, undoubtedly. The Berkeley Hotel was not for the average tourist.

Well, it was a surprising world. Six minutes ago he would have sworn that he would be spending the evening translating portions of Amiel’s

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*Diary*, and trying to find out from Caroline, without directly questioning her, what she had been up to, and who those friends were whom Venetia considered poisonous. Instead of that, he was going to spend the evening with an unknown woman . . .

The telephone bell rang again. This time it was Caroline.

"Is that you, father? Yes, it's Caroline. I'm staying to supper with the Robinsons, and I may go to a meeting afterwards. But I'll be home fairly early—about eleven, I should think. Good-bye."

So she was staying to supper with the Robinsons! He had heard a good deal of them. The Robinsons didn't dine. They were too intellectual to dine. They supped. And a meeting afterwards. A gathering, he judged, of Earnest People, who wished to remake the world after a formula of their own by Parliamentary or un-Parliamentary means. It was the sort of thing Caroline liked. Well, he had liked it himself not so very long ago, until he had realised that he liked laughing at Earnest People better than agreeing with them, and that the changing values of most things had a way of making that sort of Earnestness rather ridiculous.

And while Caroline would be thus engaged, Venetia would be dining and dancing at the

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Berkeley with a young Captain in the Rifle Brigade.

"And I shall be dining alone, after all, poor devil," he said to himself. He didn't mind, but it was a foretaste of a future, remote, of course, please God, of which he did not permit himself to think.

He looked at his watch. It was after seven. He shut up Amiel and went upstairs to dress.

### *Chapter III*

MRS. CHALMERS had not rung Charles up without certain little doubts and anxieties. She had had his telephone number in her head for four days. She wanted, for one thing, to give Mr. Hinkson's letter plenty of time to reach him. Also she had a horror of thrusting herself upon strangers. For that reason she had refused a number of letters of introduction that might have been useful to her. Most of them, to be sure, were to Americans living in London, and she hadn't come to London to be drawn into an American circle. She didn't want to be drawn into any circle, but hoped to impinge, gradually, upon several of her own choosing.

Mr. Hinkson's account of Charles, of whom he seemed extremely fond, interested her. She liked the idea of a still young man living alone with two grown-up daughters. A less original parent would, she thought, have provided them with a stepmother. There was, to her, something valiant in his determination not to do so.

"And I think you'll get on very well with the daughters," Mr. Hinkson said.

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He always made her feel twenty, and she liked it. To a man of sixty-four there is little difference between a girl of twenty and a woman of forty, unless he despises his years, and Mr. Hinkson wore them becomingly. Charles had been wrong in his guess. There was nothing whatever of a sentimental nature between them. Mr. Hinkson found her exceedingly attractive, but he also found her astonishingly well-read, and he was more interested in books than in young women. He said, when she told him she was going to England, that he had few friends and could be of little use to her.

"Since my dear wife died," he said, "I no longer care for society. But you must meet my old friend and my brother's partner, Mr. Charles Lester." He added: "Perhaps I ought to warn you that he is shy of women. Or perhaps not so much shy as wary. I blame his unfortunate marriage for that. But he will like you."

"But are you sure?" she had asked.

"So sure," was his answer, "that I am writing to him to-night."

He had meant to write that night, but it was a week or more before he did so, and his letter missed the fast boat it should have travelled on. Mrs. Chalmers had already gone, and was much missed by him. New York astounded and alarmed him, and Mrs. Chalmers was reassuring.

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New York seemed to him—for it was his first visit, and he lived, when not in London, in a Hampshire village—all speed, noise and steel. Mrs. Chalmers read books, and liked to sit by a fire and talk, and there was no noise, nor speed, nor steel about her.

What finally drove her to the telephone was her own loneliness. The few friends she had made on her previous visit were away, and she found herself unpleasantly solitary. There was plenty to occupy her in the daytime, but rather than go out alone at night she spent her evenings reading in her sitting-room and listening to the hooting of the taxis outside in Piccadilly.

When she found that Charles had not had Mr. Hinkson's letter, she felt as though she had entered a strange house unannounced and unexpected, but Charles had hastened to her aid, and she was grateful. She looked forward to his visit with some eagerness. At best, he might prove an agreeable friend; at the worst, he would be someone to talk to.

She dined as usual in her sitting-room. She didn't mind lunching alone in public, but dinner was another matter. It was too depressing. And in spite of the fact that she was not to spend that evening alone, she fell into low spirits and told herself that she had made a mistake in coming to England unaccompanied. Her whole life, she



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was ready to persuade herself, had been a series of mistakes, beginning when she was nineteen.

At nineteen she had had to choose between marrying Edward Chalmers and going to Bryn Mawr. Her inclination had been to refuse Edward Chalmers and accept the four years at the University offered her by a rich aunt. But her sentimental mother used every argument she could think of in favour of an early marriage. It was the *natural* thing, she said, for a girl to marry a good man and have babies. University education ruined girls for matrimony and motherhood—she often gave talks on “Motherhood” at her club in Buffalo—and turned them out devoid of feminine charm. “Charm” was another of her subjects, and there was something very grotesque in hearing the word so often on her lips, for she was a large, tightly-corseted woman, who looked as though she were made out of blocks of wood. She had a small, pursed-up mouth and an embryonic nose. She wore severe-looking black hats, very smart and fierce. She wanted Lydia to marry young and have dear little babies. She saturated everything to do with matrimony with a syrup of sentiment.

She married them, and put them into a little house that contained every modern improvement, and took a violent and unintelligent interest in everything the young couple thought and did.

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It was five years before Lydia woke up to the fact that her mother was an intolerable meddler, whose views of life were unworthy of a child of ten. She might never have realised this fully but for her father, who saw the cruelty of certain forms of kindness. Physically, Lydia resembled him, but mentally he saw that she was in danger of being her mother's understudy.

The climax came when Lydia's little son, Robert, died. He died because Mrs. Weston was at that time beginning to be a convert to a gentleman named Orpheus Kruperstein, who combined the teachings of Mrs. Eddy, Buddha, Zoroaster, and Tolstoi, with vegetarianism and deep breathing. His slogan was: "Let Nature do it!" in all matters concerning the health of his pupils. Mrs. Weston, a beginner and an enthusiast, interposed her wooden bulk between ailing child and doctor until it was just too late. Her reign ended then for ever. Father and daughter revolted, and with violence. Even Edward Chalmers, who had been Mrs. Weston's stoutest ally, turned against her.

Within a year of this calamity Mr. Weston died, and his widow left Buffalo for a six months' sojourn in California, where she received, as the "Well-known Eastern Club woman," much notice in the society columns of the newspapers. She went to Los Angeles and rented a bungalow, and

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her visit lengthened into a year, at the end of which time she married a "Well-known Club man" and settled down in that city.

Lydia was free of her overwhelming, overbearing mother, but she had lost her son and her father, and Edward, her mother's creature, could hardly console her for their loss. But she kept her house in Buffalo—a newer, larger house with far more modern conveniences—bright and attractive, and dressed herself with care, and was a good wife to him, and when he was away on business she read books and studied philosophy, to which she had been introduced by her father, and her outlook on life kept shifting and shifting. Edward never knew it, but for the first five years of his married life he was married to one woman, and for the last seven to two. But his perceptions were not acute.

She began leading, then, a blameless double life. Her smiles, her interest in her husband's affairs—which were flourishing amazingly—her small talk, her philosophical acceptance of her life, remained, or appeared to remain, the same. She had a certain affection for Edward, enough to make her play her part painstakingly, but not one atom of love. Nor did she fall in love with anyone else, for there was no one sufficiently different to capture her imagination.

How long she could have gone on playing this

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rôle is problematical. One day, returning late from the office in his car, and hurrying, like a good husband, in order not to keep dinner waiting overlong, Edward skidded into a lamp-post and was instantly killed.

When this happened it seemed to Lydia inevitable that it should have happened. It seemed to her to have been from the beginning of time, and she, in turning over the pages of her life, had merely come to it, as she was bound to come.

He left everything of which he died possessed "to my beloved wife, Lydia, the best friend and the finest companion and wife a man ever had. Our marriage has been a true union of souls, and if I pre-decease her, I wish her to know how completely happy she has made me."

This affected her very deeply and painfully. She remembered the day on which he had made the will, or remade it, and how bored and restless she had been. She hardly knew whether to thank God she had made him happy, or mourn to think how mistaken he had been in looking upon their marriage as "a true union of souls."

It seemed to her, then, that she had played her rôle far too well. She felt that she had cheated and deceived him. She was almost convinced that it would have been fairer and more honest to have let him see how far apart they were, even though the knowledge had hurt him and spoilt

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the calm of their married life. She hated herself for those years of smiling acquiescence and for those wifely pretences, when all the time she had been perfectly conscious of acting convincingly and well.

She was ashamed. "A true union of souls!" She thought she would never cease to feel ashamed.

She was thirty-two when he died, with the best years of her life in front of her, and very little idea of what to do with them. She sold the house in Buffalo and moved, with some of her furniture, to a flat in New York. She had been so often visited by death that for some time she found she was unable to free herself from the shadow of it. She lived, therefore, somewhat austere, and made a few musical and literary friends, and almost persuaded herself that she was content. And then in a fit of restlessness she made up her mind that she must go abroad. She had hoped for some strong motive for the journey, or for the right companion, but as time provided her with neither, she let the flat and prepared to make the journey by herself.

She had been in London a week now, and wondered if it would perhaps be wiser to go to Paris, where she had a few friends. She thought she would prefer London, but her loneliness was becoming oppressive. It wasn't that she missed

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Edward; she refused to deceive herself about that. She missed something that she had never had, a vital interest. At fifty she thought she might find it in books. At thirty-six she still looked for it in a man, and a husband.

She had never found friendships with men satisfactory. One was generally, in the end, forced to take them or leave them, a friend being, as a rule, a man who had not yet fallen in love. And having no liking for secrecy or intrigue, there remained only a husband, and all good husbands, she felt, must resemble Edward, while a bad one would only spoil her life. She liked women well enough, but found little satisfaction in their society alone.

She thought seriously while she was waiting for Charles Lester, with Mr. Galsworthy's latest novel in her hands, of taking a small house in London and perhaps adopting a boy. She was a little in love with London, in spite of her solitary state, and she thought that if she had a house to look after and a child to think of and probably love, she might not want anything more.

She decided that it was all very difficult and went on with her book. At a quarter-past nine Charles was announced.



## *Chapter IV*

**C**HARLES, as he entered the Berkeley Hotel, could hear the nervous and stimulating music of a fox-trot, threaded with the sonorous note of the saxophone, teasing the ear and pleasing the feet. Clive Cary and Venetia would be moving easily over the dance floor with that smooth freedom combined with restraint that is the charm of modern dancing. There was no longer any rocking of shoulders, or superfluous movements of arms and heads to detract from the beauty of its rhythm. Charles loved to watch it. He thought it at its best intimate, yet chaste, subtle and yet uncomplicated. He never danced himself. He said he wasn't old enough to need rejuvenating. His real reasons were more complex. The thought of competing with his daughters and their young friends did not please him. Dances he loathed, and while he admitted that it might be pleasant to take an agreeable woman out to dine, alone, and to spend the whole evening dancing with her, he visualised too well the dangers to which he would be exposing himself.

He had discovered that the average attractive

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woman exacts a good deal from her male companion. She expected, he believed, to be dined expensively, danced with competently, and made love to discreetly. Charles wished to do none of these things. A kiss in a taxi was all very well for the very young. Venetia, for instance, occasionally advocated it as the correct ending to a particularly pleasant evening. It was harmless enough, of course. She knew how to keep her young men in their places. She could be as brusque and as tonic as a blast of east wind in March when she chose.

But these innocent amusements were not for Charles. He had little use for pretence, and the, to him, dubious small coin of love had no value. He knew in his heart of hearts that he must either be in love with a woman or be indifferent to her. And he took care that he should neither love nor be loved.

He had nearly, of course, been caught napping once or twice. There was Mrs. Harcourt, for instance, a tall, lovely creature with wide, soft brown eyes, like a young deer. She had captured Charles's imagination because she looked so ethereal, and because she knew a good deal about Majolica, of which he was very fond, and had some rare pieces. She possessed one great round platter that he openly coveted. He went to her house to see it and to meet her sister, who was,

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unfortunately, prevented from coming. He went again to meet a man who knew more about Majolica than any man in Europe, and again found her alone. The expert had disappointed her.

He was obliged to admit that she made these tête-à-têtes extraordinarily agreeable, but he never forgave her for the regrettable incident that followed the second one. They were at dessert when the butler came in to say that Mr. Harcourt would like to speak to Mrs. Harcourt on the telephone. She excused herself and went to it. She presently returned with a white face and the eyes of a harassed doe.

"You must go at once," she said. "My husband has to come home to get some papers, and wants me to give him lunch. He'll be here at any moment. He mustn't find you alone with me."

Charles got to his feet, bewilderment, no doubt, on his face.

"Oh, my dear," she cried, "and we were so happy!"

She flung her long thin arms about his neck. He felt her kisses.

"Go, go!" she cried, and clung to him. "You must go at once."

He put her from him, whether kissed or un-kissed by him he could never afterwards remem-

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ber. In other respects, he retained his presence of mind.

"It's been a delightful lunch," he said clearly and firmly. "Thank you so much. I'm sorry I should have to rush off like this."

She thrust his hat and stick into his hands. There was no mistaking the genuineness of her alarm.

"My dear," she whispered, her great eyes looking tender things at him through their anxiety. The front door closed behind him. He proceeded with dignity and rage in the direction of his home. He would like to have smashed her Majolica platters over her head one by one.

She rang him up on the telephone at lengthening intervals. At last she rang him up no more. He thanked God for Mr. Harcourt.

Mrs. Chalmers was expecting him, he was told, and would he please go up. He entered the lift. He was suddenly and unpleasantly reminded of that time, twenty-two years ago, when he had gone to see Brenda at her hotel in Torquay. He wished that Caroline or Venetia or both might have come with him. Such social contacts as this seemed to him purposeless and undesirable, and to require far more effort than they were worth. But he would, of course, do what he could with the best grace possible to please Rupert Hinkson. He told himself that he would not be called

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on to make any conversational exertions. American women were famous talkers. He understood that this was due to the practice, begun at an early age, of entertaining beaux. Not one beau at a time, but several. He visualised a vivacious American girl sitting bolt upright in a chair, while arranged in a half-circle round her were half a dozen young rivals and competitors, holding their hats on their knees and delivering themselves, when given an opportunity, of admiring monosyllables.

Or didn't they do this sort of thing nowadays?

The page led him along a corridor, knocked at a door and announced: "Mr. Lester."

He entered a little room painted in green and silver. It was full of tulips. Beside a brightly-burning coal fire sat a slender, fair-haired woman dressed in black. She got up as he came in.

"How very good of you," she said, smiling.

Certainly, thought Charles, as he shook hands with her, that was a moment of clairvoyance he had had while she was speaking on the telephone. He assured her that he was perfectly charmed to have been given the opportunity, and trusted that he spoke convincingly.

"I can't account for the letter at all," she said as they sat down. "Mr. Hinkson told me he was writing to you a week or more before I left."

Charles said he thought there was a mail boat

due the next day and that the letter would probably come by it, but that was an invention, for he knew nothing whatever about it.

"It makes no difference," he said. "I can guess what was in it perfectly well. I know what I would have written myself."

"I felt like an impostor this afternoon," she told him.

"Absurd," he protested. "Any friend of Rupert Hinkson's is my friend, I hope." He thought: "The worst of these contacts is the perfectly inane things one is obliged to say." He continued: "Rupert has been like an elder brother to me. Twenty years ago he was like a father."

Lydia said that she had found him charming.

"We met at the house of a friend in New York, and he was kind enough to take some advice from me about books. Of course, that made me his friend for life. I saw a great deal of him after that. New York bewildered him a little, I think, but he enjoyed it."

There was something daughterly in the way she spoke of him. Books and authors were clearly the chief bond between them, and Charles was relieved to discover it. He didn't want to see his old friend consoling himself with this or any other young woman. As for her, she would find a husband anywhere.



## *After Noon*

She was entirely without that nervous animation that he looked for in her countrywomen. She spoke quietly, and was watchful of the things he said. Her alertness, he judged, was mental rather than physical. Physically, he thought, she might be a rather lazy woman. He couldn't, somehow, imagine her playing games. The slenderness of her arms and legs was unlike the delicately sinewed slenderness of Venetia, for instance. She was thoughtful; she was not an impetuous woman; he thought her neither cold nor emotional. Her Americanisms pleased his ear.

"I would have brought a daughter with me to-night," said Charles, "if one had been available. Venetia is downstairs dancing at this moment. My other daughter is enjoying herself in some more intellectual way."

"Absurd," she said, "your having grown-up daughters." She stated a fact, merely. There was no intention of making a compliment. "Mr. Hinkson says they're lovely."

Charles told her that when they were fourteen or so and were at school each would sign herself, when writing, "Your loveliest and favourite daughter, Venetia," or "Caroline," as the case might be. They weren't, he said, as amusing now as they were then. He thought fifteen a perfect age for a girl. He would like to have kept them there.

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While he talked, and he talked more than she did, he was observing Mrs. Chalmers somewhat more closely than he appeared to be. He wondered why more women couldn't remember to leave off as many things as Mrs. Chalmers left off. She seemed to leave off everything except what was correct and necessary in a prudish world. That is, she was discreetly clothed, but so simply. Her fair hair was formally waved and done low in a small knot, without ornament. Her black silk dress showed a slender and unadorned neck. She wore nothing on her arms and nothing on her hands but a wedding ring, which, he thought, looked as though it retained its lonely position with hopeless bravado in a lost or losing cause. An eloquent ring. Her pointed black slippers bore paste buckles, the only bit of glittering stuff about her. She might have dined anywhere. She might have been ten minutes over her toilet or two hours. It was impossible to tell. Only the lobes of her small ears showed under her hair. The whole effect seemed careless, yet skilful. A woman, Charles thought, to drive some women mad with envy. She wasn't beautiful, in spite of good skin and good grey eyes. Her face was shapely, tapering to a somewhat pointed chin, and being quite unprejudiced on this first evening, and an impartial critic, he thought her nose too wide at the nostrils. Her mouth, he felt certain, was

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also a trifle large, but it was a good-tempered mouth, and generous, and seemed to suit her very well.

"If Rupert sends me any more women," he said to himself, "I prefer that they should be variations on this same type."

After half an hour of conversation-making, they found themselves talking.

Lydia said, apropos of her interest in books, that she was tired to death of dipping into things. She had done nothing but dip into things all her life.

"Like so many other women," she said; she added that she had studied harmony with a view to a better understanding of music, and that she'd gone to lectures on art at the Metropolitan Museum; that she'd done a little book reviewing for a newspaper editor who had been a friend of her father's; that she had studied a little philosophy and a little logic.

"I like all the things I ought to like, and nothing well enough. I'm tired to death of that sort of thing."

"My daughter Caroline would say," observed Charles, "that you were a cultured parasite. Which I think is just what a woman ought to be. Women ought to keep out of the sweat and the scuffle, if they can. If they can't, that's another matter."

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She said: "Isn't that rather an old-fashioned point of view?"

"Good Lord, no," said Charles. "Feminism is old-fashioned, and dying out. I represent a still newer school of thought. I look forward to a return of the Victorian woman minus the sentiment and the hoops. The sort of woman who is dependent not because she can't help being dependent, but because she wants to be. Because she knows this talk about the right to work is all bosh. *Right* to work! Who on earth would toil in a factory or an office if they didn't have to?" He added: "But this business of making a virtue of necessity is the purest hypocrisy. I have no use for it."

She smiled at him. She recognised a conversational gauntlet when she saw it, and decided not to take it up.

"I can only claim," she said, "to have been a satisfactory housekeeper for something like twelve years. Now I come to think of it, I don't think I ever once heard my husband make a complaint. That's something to be proud of, I suppose."

"It must be a record," Charles said, "even among American husbands, who are popularly supposed, in Europe, where men still have some rights, to take everything lying down."

She laughed at that.

"It would amuse me to know," she said, "what

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you really think of American husbands over here. We hear rumours occasionally."

"I'd better not tell you," Charles answered, "till I know you better."

"Even in America," she reminded him, "which gets generalised about more than most countries, there are husbands and husbands."

"Oh, that's true, of course, but there's a type. The average American husband—I'm speaking now of people more or less like ourselves—differs very much from the average English husband. The American is trained for matrimony. He's house-broken from early youth. The Englishman isn't. The American likes his chains. The Englishman doesn't. He only endures the chains because he sees they're unavoidable. The American likes them to be as tight as possible. For the first few years, at any rate. He rattles them and says: 'Look at me; I'm properly bound and tied. Can't move hand or foot without my wife knowing it. This is the real thing. It's great.' But the Englishman consciously makes a sacrifice when he marries. He says: 'I'm a sort of slave. I don't ask for pity. I did it with my eyes open. But I love the creature.'"

"Do you talk to your daughters like this?" she asked, much amused.

"Oh, yes. I may add that I don't expect them to be influenced by anything I say. I think chil-

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dren nowadays are best left to their own divorces."

"How absurd of you," she said, liking him. "You may say what you like about matrimony, but I'm certain that you want your daughters to marry."

"I don't want them to marry at all," he said. "But I shall never try to prevent it. It wouldn't be the slightest use, for one thing. The conservatism of the young always surprises me. They rarely try to introduce new things of any importance. Reforms are always left to the aged. Although my daughter Caroline," he added, "may take a different course."

"Tell me about her," she said.

"No, no," Charles protested. "I've talked too much about myself. I haven't even asked you how you like London. Not that Londoners ever do ask."

"Since you have," she said, "I must confess I know it very superficially. I was here some years ago with my husband. It was a business trip, so I did a good deal of sight-seeing, alone. I didn't go anywhere to speak of, except to places of interest, and to the theatres, but I loved it all. I love it now, lonely as I am. I hadn't meant to tell you," she said, "that I was lonely."

"Why?"

"It sounds so . . . oh, so like a bid for sym-



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pathy. I don't mean it as that. Still, the fact remains. But it's my own fault for coming alone."

"I don't know if Venetia and Caroline will be of any use," Charles said. "Venetia models all day at the Polytechnic, and plays golf on Saturdays, and Caroline writes articles with a view to inflaming the masses. But you must come and dine one night and meet them. Any night. What about Monday?"

"Monday? I should love that. But I don't want you to feel responsible for me, just because of Mr. Hinkson."

"I have made it a lifelong rule," said Charles, "never to take on any responsibilities unless I know they're going to be agreeable ones. In that way I've avoided a great deal of inconvenience. We'll say Monday, then."

She sent for something to drink before eleven, proving that she was not ignorant of the ways of London, and Charles, in a distinctly talkative mood, drank a whisky-and-soda and gave a rough outline of the machinery of English Government, not without a certain satirical humour that she saw was natural to him. He had little reverence, she perceived, for anything. He had only likes and dislikes, and his reasons for them. He enjoyed laughing at things better than praising them, that was obvious, although he could praise, when he wished to do so, heartily enough. Ed-

ward, she remembered, had never laughed at anything unless it was quite clearly intended as a joke. Existing institutions he regarded as sacred. If witch-burning had been approved of by the Government of the United States, he would have died in defence of it. Edward was, from the point of view of rulers, the perfect citizen.

Charles stayed until nearly twelve. This, he admitted to himself, was unnecessarily long, but he also admitted to himself that he had rarely met a woman in whose company it was pleasanter to stay. She had talked very little about herself, a fact he regretted, but he gathered that she had spent a dozen years or so in ordering dinners, and seeing that her husband had nothing to complain of. She didn't say so, but that was the impression he got. And yet the chances were that she was ready to marry again. Incomprehensible!

Well, suppose that she didn't marry? What would she do with herself? Charles knew very well what he would do if he were a pretty woman and a widow. He'd have no scruples whatever about keeping a dozen men dangling, just for the amusement to be got out of them. And yet, he supposed, even that got boring at times. But surely four or five years of it would be profitable and interesting. After that, perhaps, a woman might begin ordering dinners again . . .

He resisted the temptation to glance into the

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restaurant to see if Venetia were still there, and went home not displeased with his evening. Only Caroline was in, and she had gone straight up to bed, leaving a note on the hall-table.

"I've had a thrilling evening. I heard Roscoe Kelly speak. He's a perfect inspiration. I've asked a friend of mine to dinner on Monday night. I'll tell you more in the morning. Also I've got some news for you." She signed herself: "C. Lester."

If Mrs. Chalmers could be regarded as news, he would also have news for C. Lester. He took the second volume of Amiel's *Diary* up to bed with him, but before he had turned many pages he felt the nearness of sleep, and switched off the light. He remembered, as he did so, that he had omitted to tell Mrs. Chalmers that dinner was at eight. He'd have to ring up in the morning, or write a note. Or, better yet, one of the girls could do it.

Then it occurred to him that Sunday lay in between. She would probably find Sunday hideously dull.

"Oh, well, hang it all," he said to himself as he turned over, "I can't be expected to brighten the life of every lonely American woman in London."

## *Chapter V*

THE Lester family had one peculiarity. They liked getting up early. Early rising had never been a hardship for Charles, who had always found that life went too quickly for him. He complained that it streamed by like the landscape from a train window. He vastly preferred a long day to a short one. The girls had inherited or otherwise acquired this view, so that the three of them were usually to be found at the breakfast table at or shortly after eight o'clock. If Venetia had had a late night she preferred making it up the following night.

Caroline liked early rising because she was determined to enjoy whatever was strenuous, or hard, or ascetic, or the reverse of luxurious. It was a small and secret annoyance to her that Charles and Venetia, both of whom loved comfort and the good things of life, got up early because they liked it. It seemed to her that they were trespassing on her preserves. She would have liked to be the only one in the house who wouldn't dream of lying in bed after half-past seven.

## *After Noon*

On Sunday mornings they breakfasted at half-past eight. On the Sunday morning following Charles's meeting with Mrs. Chalmers, he took the opportunity of telling the girls about her while they were at the table. They were mildly interested. It was their habit never to think anything very surprising.

"Do take her out, father," said Venetia. "You're becoming a misogynist. It'll be good for you."

Charles said somewhat violently that he was becoming nothing of the sort. He said it was because he loved the society of women so much, and admired them so deeply that he thought it better to see little of them.

"I am full of the most exquisite illusions about them," he said, "all of which I wish to preserve."

"Well, after bringing up two daughters," observed Venetia, "I don't see how you can have any."

"Daughters aren't women," Charles replied.

"Is she intelligent?" asked Caroline.

Charles, knowing very well what Caroline meant by intelligence, said no, she wasn't.

"She's like you," he said maliciously. "She has merely a pliable and adaptable female mind. I much prefer that."

Caroline smiled faintly, and made no reply.

She had said nothing as yet about her news. She was keeping it until it should burst with its own ripeness in its own time.

She was much fairer than Venetia, and her features were less soft and rounded. She was less graceful, too, and lacked Venetia's physical charm. She was quite conscious of this and thought of it with a sort of pride. She wanted not so much to attract as to startle people by her honesty, her modernism, and the clarity and penetration of her mind. She had the same pure and entirely misleading look of innocence about her forehead and eyes that her sister had, but Caroline strove to achieve an expression of austerity and aloofness.

On her dressing-table was a box of face powder of the cheaper sort which had, Venetia noticed, been nearly empty for months. She suspected her of eking it out by small and furtive helpings from her own store, which was of a vastly superior quality. But Caroline used no other aids to beauty. She possessed no rouge, no lip salve, no eyebrow pencil; she used no Chypre, beloved of Venetia, and made by Coty; no fragrant bath salts or bath powder, but only honest and unperfumed soap. She scrubbed herself as though she hated her body, and bought extra rough towels with which to dry herself. Her bed was of enamelled iron, with cheap, uncomfortable springs. She cared little for clothes and gave little thought to them,



## *After Noon*

but she considered her own taste instinctive and infallible. She was tremendously interested in her own development and her own personality, and was glad that she was healthy, young, and sufficiently attractive, because she thought that all these things would render her more useful to the cause she had adopted.

She was sympathetic towards Venetia's work, but she wanted her to spell it with a capital W, which annoyed her sister. She thought Venetia ought to dedicate it to humanity in some way, and do symbolic, heroic figures with a deep significance, and call them "Motherhood," "The Worker," "Brotherhood," etc., while Venetia was content to model little figures for gardens and fountains, and not call them anything at all.

Charles delighted in this difference between his daughters. When they were still babies he used to fear that they might grow up, being twins, monotonously alike, but before they were three this fear was dispelled for ever. He responded to both of them. He thought he understood both of them. He loved them equally, but he couldn't help paying a deep and secret homage to the greater beauty and charm of his daughter Venetia.

During breakfast there was, thanks to Mrs. Chalmers, a good deal of talk of America. Charles made the assertion that on the subject of America they were as ignorant as Marie in

the kitchen, and that on the whole their education had been an expensive waste of time.

To refute this unjust accusation they both began telling him what they knew. He said he would listen to Caroline first.

Caroline said that she looked upon America as one of the backward countries, from the Socialistic point of view. Labour, she said, was notoriously badly organised and had little or no political power. In other respects she pictured it, somewhat vaguely, as very rich and very ready, in a generous but misguided way, to pour out money for sentimental causes without troubling to combat the diseases at the roots of these causes. She considered America, she said, the breeding ground of Capitalism. She succeeded in naming eleven states, six presidents, two rivers, and five cities. She wanted very much, she said, to visit Chicago—which she pronounced with a hard C, in spite of Charles's protest—New York, and Salt Lake City. But particularly Chicago. When pressed for reasons, she gave it out that somewhere in Chicago lived one of the shining lights of her and the Robinsons' world. A man who would some day "lead the Workers to Victory." She couldn't, or wouldn't, divulge his name. She made the mistake of thinking that Honolulu was part of California. It annoyed her to be caught out in this fashion, and she blushed.

## After Noon

"Anyway," she said, "you go to it from California. It's years since I studied a map. I don't seem to have time."

Venetia's account was more spirited. She had a more vivid imagination than Caroline.

She could see New York, she said, quite plainly, in her mind's eye. Through the whole length of it there ran that wonderful street, Fifth Avenue, with millionaires' palaces at one end and the Bowery at the other, and, of course, *marvellous* shops in between.

"I wish to goodness someone would turn me loose in New York," she said, "with a thousand pounds."

"You're quite loose enough," said Charles. "Go on."

"You can tell exactly how much money people have," she continued, "according to how near or at which end of Fifth Avenue they live. They live chiefly in the side-streets, of course, unless they're millionaires, and actually live on it. If you live on the East side and at the right end, you're rich and chic. If you live on the West side and at the right end, you're only rich. If you don't do either, you might as well be dead."

"Absurd," said Charles. "Stick to facts, if you know any."

She went on to say that there was Long Island not far distant where they played polo, and there

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were lovely summer resorts, like Newport and Coney Island and Bar Harbour. Charles abolished Coney Island as a summer resort. And there were charming winter resorts like Florida, for instance, which was something like Monte Carlo."

"It happens to be an enormous State," Charles observed.

"Of course," said Caroline. "I meant to include it in my list of States. That's twelve I know."

Venetia said it was quite easy to know it after she'd mentioned it. She named three more States than Caroline and two more cities. She had heard a good deal about a State called Tex-ass, which she said could produce anything from palms and alligators to Siberian snows and strawberries.

"It's the place," she said, recalling a young American she had admired at seventeen, "for two-fisted he-men. It's Gawd's country. A lot of places claim to be, I know, but Tex-ass really is."

"Come, come," said Charles, "enough of that. What do you know, if anything, of the Government of the United States? I'll hear from both at once."

Much confusion existed in their minds as to the two Washingtons. They imagined that the country was governed from the upper left-hand corner, where, with surprising accuracy, they placed the

## *After Noon*

State of that name. They thought it very unfair that the city should flourish independently at the extreme opposite corner of the map. Caroline said that she was really very glad to have been put right about this.

There was, they told him, a body called the House of Representatives, which was something like the House of Commons; and then there was the Senate, which they supposed was more like the House of Lords. Venetia said they didn't wait for the President to be hoofed out, "as our premiers are hoofed out," whenever there was a political crisis; they elected them every four years, anyway. She thought it a much tidier system.

"How many Presidents do you know?" Charles asked her.

"I once shook hands with Mr. Taft," said Venetia, "but I can hardly say I know him."

"The ignorance of my daughters," said Charles, pretending not to be amused, "is as a grievous weight upon me."

Venetia seemed more than usually happy that morning. Charles asked her if she had enjoyed her evening, and she said that it had been absolutely divine. He suspected that she was fonder of Clive Cary than of any of her other young men, but he placed little importance on the fact. There would be dozens of young men yet. Suddenly he remembered Caroline's note.

"Caroline, who's this you've asked to dinner to-morrow night? Anyone I know?"

He saw Venetia look quickly and with some surprise at her sister.

"It's Phil Robinson—the Robinsons' son. If you'd like me to put him off because of Mrs. Chalmers, I'll ask him another night."

"No, no," Charles hastened to say. "Let him come by all means."

"Good!" said Venetia. "Then I can ask Clive. I did ask him as a matter of fact."

"Then we'll have an even number," Charles said. "But I never knew before that the Robinsons had a son."

"I haven't known him well until fairly lately," Caroline told him. "He's been abroad. He's extraordinarily clever."

"In what way?" demanded Venetia.

"He does a great deal of public speaking, and he runs a number of boys' clubs, and he's been to Russia as a Labour delegate. He's only twenty-six."

"Is he good-looking?" inquired Venetia.

Caroline answered, looking austere: "I don't know. I never thought about it."

"Heavens, you must be in love!" exclaimed her sister.

Charles felt a sudden pang. This was the first time that Caroline had shown enough inter-



## After Noon

est in a man to ask him to dinner. Had he been leaving her too much to her own devices? He hated asking questions. And then, his dread sharpened, he remembered that she had said she had news for him.

"Was that your news?" he asked. "You said last night . . ."

"Oh, no. I've been waiting for you to ask about that. I've been invited to join the regular staff of the *Daily Vanguard*."

"My dear girl!" cried Charles with mixed feelings. "When did this happen?"

"I heard about it yesterday."

"That beastly little rag!" exclaimed Venetia. "You can't expect me to rejoice over that."

"I don't. I only thought you might be interested."

"Well, I am interested. Only I suppose it means father will have to go bail for you one of these days. Why couldn't you get put on a decent paper?"

"The only paper you think is decent is the *Morning Post*," retorted Caroline. "And I don't think they'd care for my articles."

"Come, no politics," protested Charles. "It isn't every girl of twenty who gets a job on the staff of a daily paper."

"It isn't every girl of twenty, or over, who's red enough for the *Vanguard*," Venetia retorted.

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"Well, I admit I think it needs toning down," said Charles. "It's pitched in too high and hysterical a key for me. But when there are only two or three tenors and about forty loudly booming basses, one must expect a certain straining of the vocal chords on the part of the few . . ."

Caroline said nothing, but little darts played about the corners of her mouth. Her secret amusement annoyed Venetia, who finished her breakfast quickly and excused herself, saying as she went out of the room:

"All the same, you'll get disgustingly one-sided. You haven't even been using my face powder lately. I knew it was a bad sign."

When she had gone Caroline said: "I don't think Venetia is looking particularly well. The vitiated air of ball-rooms and night clubs can't be very good for her."

"I dare say it's as good as the vitiated air of crowded political meetings," said Charles, who always liked justice to be done. "And she gets the exercise thrown in."

"Perhaps," agreed Caroline, defeated on that point. "But it seems a hopeless waste of time for a girl with Venetia's intelligence."

Charles observed, by way of changing the subject:

"As we'll be six on Monday night, I think

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we'd better get Mrs. Cramp in, to help Marie in the kitchen."

"Must we make a fuss, father? It seems to me quite unnecessary to have Mrs. Cramp. I'll get King to come and wait on the table as usual. I do hate the idea of making a to-do over a few guests. It savours too much of the bourgeoisie."

"For God's sake, Caroline," cried Charles, "not that word, I implore you! You know how I loathe it."

Caroline flushed. The word had slipped out, and she was a little ashamed. It was much in use at the Robinsons', but here it was folly to use it. Also she had used it in a way she had not intended.

"Well, you know what I mean. The black-coated proletariat. Perhaps you prefer that. But we'll have Mrs. Cramp if you like."

"I don't care about Mrs. Cramp. What I do insist on is that you refrain from using those overworked words, 'bourgeoisie,' 'proletariat,' and 'wage-slaves.' They offend my ears."

"If these things exist—and they do—why shouldn't we name them?"

"I hate all these parrot cries," he said.

"I first heard them from you."

"Yes, yes, I know. I was younger then. I apologise."

"You've changed a lot lately, father."

## After Noon

"Nonsense! I haven't changed at all. In what way? You mean because I've modified my views somewhat in the last ten years."

"More than modified them. Changed them. And quite lately."

"No, only modified them. And you must remember that in my younger days I was rather bitter. I was a fool to be bitter. Bitterness is nothing but the acknowledgment of defeat."

"But there are millions who are defeated and must acknowledge it, and have every right to be bitter."

"Then at least let us consider that sad fact without being bitter ourselves."

Caroline pushed back her chair. Her blue eyes flashed.

"Well, I'm bitter," she said, "and I'm glad of it. If I weren't, do you suppose I'd write the articles I do, or work for the *Daily Vanguard*?"

"You're wrong then," said Charles. "That's why I'm afraid you people will defeat your own ends. Your motive power ought to be love, not bitterness. Love, and pity."

"Love!" she cried. She stood up, facing him across the table, and he saw the contempt in her face. "Love!"

"Well," said Charles.

"Love!" she cried again. "Nearly two thousand years ago it was said that the world could

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be redeemed through love. Well, look at the world. It's more selfish, more cruel, more pitiless, more lustful than ever before."

"Not nearly so cruel, my dear," Charles interrupted her, but she paid no attention to him.

"That's all the good love has done. I tell you, father, what's wanted now is hatred, white-hot and bitter, and intolerance. Intolerance of what's unfair and unjust. Yes, bitterness and intolerance are what's wanted now. Love! It's nothing but selfishness, and sentiment, and greed. It makes me sick."

Charles looked at her, amazed.

"Don't talk to me about love," she cried, her eyes blazing.

"You're talking rot, my darling," said Charles.

"I'm talking against rot," she retorted, and went towards the door.

"Too little love," said Charles, reaching for the Sunday paper, "is what's wrong with the world, and always has been."

"Sunday school talk!" she said.

"I could almost wish I had sent you to Sunday school," he replied.

"You fed us quite enough soothing syrups as it was," she said. "Well, I must leave you now. I've got some letters to write." The door closed behind her.

Charles laughed.

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"Venetia," he said to himself, "accuses me of being too radical. Caroline of being too conservative. The truth must be that I am exactly right. That's very comforting indeed."

He lit a cigarette and thought over what Caroline had said. Presently he got up and went thoughtfully into his library, where he sat down in his armchair, the paper unopened on his knee. This, of course, was a phase. Caroline was probably quoting opinions she had lately heard—from the Robinsons, no doubt. But there was the usual grain of truth in it all.

What was there in all this talk about love? The word had a hypnotic quality. It might be love that made the world go round—but what an evil place, take it all in all, it still was, full of men like wild beasts, on the prowl.

Take the love of man for woman. He had loved Brenda, loved her wholly, with everything there was in him for those few years, and yet she wasn't even a decent savage, with a decent savage's instincts. She had deserted her young, without a second thought. What had been the good of that love? Was he any the better for it? Was she? She had said she loved him. An obvious lie. He had merely answered her purposes. They had sworn to love, honour and obey each other, till death did them part. More lies. If he saw her now he wouldn't cross the



## *After Noon*

street to speak to her. He loved his children, and yet in all probability he had not dealt well with them. Perhaps someone who loved them less could have equipped them better for life.

Love, he told himself, was too uncertain, too much at the mercy of circumstance, too variable, too delicate, too unfathomable. "Passion is real enough," thought Charles, "hatred, as Caroline says, is real enough, intolerance and bitterness are real." For a moment it seemed to him that Caroline was right.

"At any rate," he said to himself, "I will never risk love again. It's all too painful, too misleading, and the death of love is the most agonising thing in the world. I love my daughters. I must always love them, whatever they do or become. Nothing can alter that. But I will never love anyone else. Thank God I've done with all that."

Once more he surveyed his present life, and found that it was good. He wanted nothing changed. He looked out of the window at the bare bones of the fig tree in the garden and felt an affection even for it.

It was pleasurable, too, to anticipate the next day's work. Its problems engaged his thoughts only during working hours. At other times he was able to put them wholly out of his mind. He was fortunate, he knew, in having found an occu-

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pation that was congenial to him. It gave him a very definite satisfaction, especially as it had to do with the certainty, and the changelessness, and the honest inviolability of numbers.

If there had been a goddess of numbers, he would have worshipped at her altar. She would have been the sort of woman from whom he could feel he had nothing to fear.

## Chapter VI

**D**RIVING up Piccadilly and across Hyde Park Corner, Lydia said to herself, as she was often to say: "Now I'm getting the feel of it. Now I'm beginning to know what London is really like."

It was raining quietly, the first rain she had seen since her arrival. There was no wind; and the streets mirrored the lights of lamps and of passing cars and of shops. She felt a part of the great drama of London night life, a life that seemed to her quiet and subdued after New York, or Paris, and yet full of a mysterious undercurrent of excitement and anticipation. There was no noise or hurry; the cars and taxis slipped by one another with moderate speed, the buses hummed by like good-natured bees, seeking or returning home with honey. The calm dignity of the policemen seemed to have its effect everywhere. She felt it must regulate the very beat of London's heart.

Surely one of the pleasantest things in the world was to be *en route* for something that promised to be enjoyable; to be going somewhere

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—to be taken somewhere—where one wanted to go.

She thought it a great mistake on the part of the Creator not to convince even the most doubting by conclusive evidence that we were all going somewhere, and that it only remained for us to ensure for ourselves a pleasant holiday—and, say, a warm welcome from an indulgent host—by behaving under all circumstances like reasonable people.

Then would vanish all human despair, a despair that she felt all the more keenly and cruelly because she had known the very depths of it herself. "If Robert had only lived!" It was a recurrent and never-fading agony. That very morning she had brought tears of exquisite anguish to her own eyes by thinking what it would have been like to have had him with her, to be taking him to see the Tower of London and the Zoo. A fury possessed her at such times, an impotent fury that left her weak with the sharp violence of her feelings.

They bore to the left at Hyde Park Corner, passed some big open squares, and drew up in a narrowish street full of moderate-sized houses. She looked about her with interest—for Charles Lester lived here—while the taxi driver heaved himself up and felt in inaccessible pockets for change he seemed not to possess.

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She thought the place suited Charles, for whom she already felt a warm regard. A whimsical, humorously assertive man, very clear about his own views and with plenty of character of a choice and independent sort. A charming nature, too, she imagined. She was amused by the way he threw back his head when he made a statement, and by his abrupt and nervous movements. She thought his face, too, amusing and attractive.

As she waited for the door to be opened, another guest arrived on foot.

He wore no hat, and his hair, which was arrogantly abundant, was raised and stirred by the night air. She saw that he was one of those people who do not wish to be like everybody else. His open coat displayed a black tie with long ends, and a collar of unusual shape. He had thin features and wore pince-nez.

She said: "Good-evening." It seemed pointless to stand there saying nothing to each other.

The young man turned a fixed gaze upon her.

"Good-evening. I had no idea it was going to be a party."

"Do two guests," Lydia asked smiling, "make a party?"

Before he could answer the door was opened and a maid received their wraps and led them upstairs.

## *After Noon*

Lydia's first impression of 14, Eaton Gardens, was of roast duck. She was to find out later that, in that house, if one's nose was keen, one always knew what was on the menu. To Charles this was a matter of indifference, provided the smells were good ones; to Venetia it was extremely vexatious; while Caroline accepted it as a matter of course.

"The vast majority of people," she said, for she never hesitated to state the obvious, "cook their own food and use the kitchen as a living-room."

Lydia, following the maid into the drawing-room, heard her announce: "Mrs. Chalmers and Mr. Robinson."

Charles came forward first to welcome her, closely followed by a tall and lovely girl with dark hair, and a fair girl with an anxious abstracted look, who nevertheless greeted her very pleasantly.

"This is Venetia, this is Caroline," said Charles, with a hand on a shoulder of each: an unnecessary introduction, for Lydia had placed them easily enough. Venetia introduced a man named Captain Cary, to whose physical charms Lydia at once responded, with a mental footnote: "But he must be stupid if he's as good-looking as that." She was then introduced to the young man she had spoken to on the doorstep.

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"Mr. Robinson and I met at the front door," she said, with that quick and accurate pounce upon the name that is the gift of Americans alone. He had previously been introduced, she noticed, to Venetia and to Charles by Caroline. He looked an aggressive young man. Without his pince-nez he might have seemed more human, but all the aggressiveness and combativeness there was in him seemed to rush to that focal point and look out of those two windows rimmed with thin metal.

Lydia stood with her back to the fire talking to Charles. She wore black lace, but she had thrown over her shoulders a gold-coloured shawl which accentuated the pale gold of her hair.

"It was more than kind of you," she was saying, "to ring me up yesterday and ask me to that concert. But I felt you had me on your mind. You said to yourself: 'I must do something to try to amuse that woman on a Sunday afternoon.'"

"Then you didn't have a headache?"

"No. I thought the least I could do was to invent one. I'm certain that only one man in a million really likes concerts."

"But I am that man," said Charles.

"And here," said Venetia, indicating Captain Cary, "is another."

"Ah well, Cary," Charles said, with a gesture



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of the hand, "would have been a musician if he hadn't been a soldier. I don't think we need consider his case. Let us leave Cary out of it altogether."

Cary smiled and said that if he could spend three hours a day regularly on music, he would be willing to call soldiering the best profession in the world.

"Clive," said Venetia with an amused and affectionate look at him, "I never knew anyone like you. You order your life just as a good nurse orders the life of a child. So many hours for this, so many for that. You're too dreadfully well-balanced."

"Thank you," the young man replied. "All your stings have a compliment in their tails, Venetia."

Lydia saw their eyes flash messages to one another.

"There's something between them," she thought. She wondered if Charles knew.

Caroline and Mr. Robinson had left the group and were sitting on the sofa talking with restraint upon commonplace subjects. The maid brought in cocktails mixed expertly by Venetia, but two remained untouched upon the tray.

"No cocktail, Caroline?" Venetia asked. "This is highly unusual."

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Mr. Robinson rose and said that he had never seen Miss Lester drink anything at all.

"We think alike in that respect," he said, and looked fixedly through his pince-nez at Charles. "That healthy people cannot possibly require artificial stimulants."

"This is a sign of grace on Caroline's part," said Charles, "but a recent one. I welcome it."

Mr. Robinson then addressed himself to Lydia.

"You have done the right thing in your country," he said. "I can't tell you how tremendously we admire you for it."

Lydia was heartily sick of this subject and had hoped never to hear it discussed in England, or, at best, only touched upon lightly. She said with a smile:

"It's well to remember that we're a spirited and resourceful people. We don't submit tamely to virtue."

"Quite right," said Venetia. "I've no use for people who submit to virtue."

She thought she was going to like Mrs. Chalmers, and already admired her looks and poise. Caroline's young man she summed up after a hasty judgment as a sententious ass.

"How awful," she thought, "if Caroline decided one day to introduce something like that into our nice little family."

And then it flashed through her mind that a

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few days ago she had thought of introducing Frank Stoddard. Yes, incredible as it now seemed since Clive Cary's return from Gibraltar, she had thought quite seriously of it. She was more prepared to look tolerantly upon Mr. Robinson.

Caroline was feeling both nervous and defiant.

She told herself that she didn't care what any of them thought, and yet she was ashamed of the longing she had that Phil Robinson might impress them favourably. Unfortunately the subjects in which he was most interested were too controversial for a dinner party. They should hear him on Syndicalism, or listen to some of his talks on "The Coming Citizen" at one of his boys' clubs. He was a strange mixture, she knew, of sentimentality and violence. It was the sentimental side of his nature which pleased her least. But she saw that without it they might never have come together. If he had given himself up wholly to one aim, that of making war on existing conditions, there would have been no room in his life for her. But besides wanting to make war he wanted to make love, and to be loved. Caroline's fair face and fair body, her passionate adoption of his cause, her combativeness, and her sincere dislike of ease and softness roused in him the most extreme devotion. She was to him both a

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soul-mate and a mascot. She was, or would be, he believed, the Jeanne d'Arc of the New Crusade. He read into her simple and unconsciously plagiarised writings the utterings of a young high priestess. And while he flattered himself that he took a Freudian view of sex and love, he nevertheless melted into awe and tenderness at her approach.

All this she realised, young as she was. When they first met she hoped he would find in her a clear-eyed woman who had discarded all illusions and who took a purely cynical view of the ideas cherished by other girls of her age; as a fighter, even as a fanatic. Instead of that she found herself exalted and regarded as a symbol. Whenever Phil Robinson looked into the future and breathed the word "wife" she trembled at the brightness and beauty of his vision. Not even to her inmost consciousness did she whisper that it suggested to her the frosted angel on an old-fashioned Christmas card. He was the embodiment, the very expression of her secret self. So fearful had she been at first of losing him that she dared not breathe his name to a living soul. And now that he was hers, the knowledge that they loved was too dazzling to be shared. She wanted to gloat upon it in private a little longer.

Charles had not the faintest inkling of all this. He only thought that evening:

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"At last Caroline's taking an interest in a young man. He seems a decent sort, in his way. She had to begin somewhere, I suppose."

The dinner was excellent and went gaily. Mrs. Chalmers made herself agreeable to everyone alike. Charles greatly admired the elegant simplicity of her person, and her graceful blonde head. She would never, he thought, become a possessive woman; he feared no agile and winding tentacles put out feelingly in his direction. No, she was trustworthy and unacquisitive; not the sort of woman to lay traps. She would be too proud and too independent to lay traps. He hoped the girls liked her.

Caroline didn't classify people according to the countries in which they happened to be born, but according to their conditions. Mrs. Chalmers wasn't, to her, an American woman; she was one of a vast class of people who had never been obliged to work or to depend on their own efforts. Pleasant as she undoubtedly was, she was the product of an evil system. She had been kept in idleness first by a father and then by a husband. The world thought this respectable. Not so Caroline, who, since she was eighteen, had earned by her pen an average of thirty shillings a week, which she turned over to her reluctant father to help pay for her board and keep. Until the time

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when she would be wholly self-supporting, she felt herself to be a burden on the community.

Mr. Robinson introduced the subject of sculpture, with the idea of making himself pleasant to Venetia. He was of the opinion that there were only two sculptors who "mattered," and they were both of our own time—Rodin and Epstein. Epstein, in his "inspired" moments, he considered the greater of the two. Only Caroline saw eye to eye with him in his desire to sweep away all classic art. Lydia protested warmly, but, fearing to be drawn into an argument on a matter about which she knew little, she changed the subject and asked Charles if he would be good enough, some day, to take her to the National Gallery.

He said he would be delighted; that he often went there himself to look at the fifteenth and sixteenth century Italians.

"Mind you," he said, "I think all art is suspect."

This astonished Lydia. It might be merely another conversational gauntlet, but she felt obliged to stoop and pick it up.

"What do you mean? What an extraordinary thing to say."

"Not at all. I think as the world is now we would be better off without it. All this to-do that's made about art is out of all proportion to

its value; and it's made, as a rule, by people who are mere sentimental hangers-on. The very word 'Art' moves them in some sickly way. They don't know how or why."

"But what would life be without it?" she asked.

"I can tell you. It would be far more rigorous and vital. The desire to create would find a better outlet, and be put to a more practical purpose. I would like all the things that are for daily use made pleasant to handle and to look upon, and let art exist in that way, domesticated, like the horse. It's ludicrous and paradoxical to have this craze for art flourishing in a world that's as full of sordid ugliness as this is. Ugly streets, ugly houses, ugly towns, ugly people, ugly morals. Art, under such conditions, is a mere growth, an excrescence. It might almost be called a disease. It's as unhealthy as the flush on the cheek of the consumptive."

"That's good, father," said Venetia approvingly. "That's very good."

"I know towns," went on Charles, ignoring her, "that are the very abomination of sordid hideousness, and yet possess deserted art galleries full of treasures. It makes me think of a dirty slut wearing diamonds."

"There is a great deal in what you say, Mr. Lester," said Phil Robinson. "Art, at the present



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moment, is merely the kept woman of the capitalist class."

"Oh, but he didn't say that," protested Lydia.

"He will to-morrow," said Caroline quickly.

Charles turned upon her to attack her. "Am I a man to say one thing to-day and another to-morrow?"

"Yes," cried Venetia breaking in excitedly. "For instance, if to-morrow you heard some City man with a red neck say that three good meals a day and a roof over his head were all that any man needed, you'd flay him alive."

"So I would," agreed Charles. "And if you listened to me then and now, you'd know exactly what I meant. Between the things you say when you attack a thing and the things you say in defence of it when it's attacked, lies the exact truth."

Lydia was amused at the way in which he held his own against these two flouting daughters. She was much drawn to all of them, and wished sincerely, and a little wistfully, that they might like her and make her feel one of them.

Upstairs in the drawing-room later Captain Cary played the piano. He played Mozart and Purcell and Brahms, drifting from one thing to another and stopping now and then to talk to Lydia, who sat near the piano. Mr. Lester was right, he told her. He would have been a pianist if his people hadn't thrust him into Sandhurst.

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No, he wasn't altogether sorry. During times of peace he managed to do a good deal of practising. He added that he thought the discipline of army life had probably been good for him. Lydia, on a closer inspection, decided this wasn't humbug, and thought his face sensitive and intelligent.

Venetia let her eyes rest with unspeakable satisfaction on his dark smooth head and shapely back.

"If I don't get him," she said to herself, "I shall die. I don't want anything or anyone else in this world."

She wondered if Mrs. Chalmers realised how wonderful he was. It seemed to her so obvious that he was in every way adorable and desirable. She looked speculatively at Mrs. Chalmers and wondered if she had loved her husband, and how much; and if she were now in love with anyone else. She couldn't, somehow, picture that charming face, animated though it was, under the spell of violent emotions.

"She looks almost too terribly a lady," she thought.

Mr. Robinson had at last got on to the subject of Russia. He was too young and too earnest to refrain. He agreed that in most respects the Russian Revolution had been a failure, but he attributed this to the peculiar conditions prevail-

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ing in Russia. Russia had attempted to pass from a semi-feudal society to a communistic one overnight, and the result had been the substitution of one dictatorship or oligarchy for another. Mr. Robinson didn't believe in dictatorships in any form. When pressed by Charles to define his politics he said he was a Guild Socialist or a Libertarian Syndicalist, if you preferred that.

He wanted to begin with Land Nationalisation and the appropriation, without compensation, of Economic Rent. Every child, he said, would receive his or her share from birth. While under sixteen the children's shares would be paid to the mother, thus endowing motherhood, or, in the case of the mother's death, to the father or legal guardian. He held forth with the fluency of the practised speaker. He had preached these things, Charles saw, a hundred times. He let him talk on, less concerned to refute any of his statements than to discover what manner of man he was.

Caroline's little airs of proprietorship both amused and distressed him. She "fed" Robinson; she gave him cues; she asked the right questions.

"She's been with him an awful lot," thought Charles. "When, where and how?"

Lydia went home at half-past eleven, and Captain Cary went with her. He lived, when he was in London, in rooms in Chapel Street. He said in a low voice to Venetia as he made his fare-

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wells: "I'll ring you up in the morning." She nodded, and again Lydia caught what seemed to her a significant look.

"They're in love," she said to herself. "Well, if I were either, I should be in love with the other."

As for Venetia, it seemed to her that things had progressed without anything having been said. She felt that some mutual wave of feeling was sweeping them nearer to that goal she so ardently desired. She envied Mrs. Chalmers, driving with him through the dark streets.

Mr. Robinson lingered till the clock struck twelve, and he caught Caroline's eye. There was nothing for it then but to say: "Well, I really must go," which he did, and the moment the front door closed behind him Venetia rushed off to bed. She wanted to be alone to think about Clive, and to recreate as much as she could of him for her greedy thoughts to feed upon. Before he went away to Gibraltar she had known her own feelings about him, but he hadn't said anything, he hadn't even written, and she had tried to put him out of her mind. Now he was back, and in his absence they had mysteriously drawn closer to each other, as though in their subconscious thoughts they had been together all the time.

Charles was at last alone with Caroline.

She was a greater lover of order than Venetia,

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and it was she who, at the end of the evening, always tidied the cushions, slapping them into shape, and pushed the chairs into their accustomed places. Charles, watching her, thought he had never seen her face look so mature. He stood by the fire, half expecting her to ask him what he thought of Robinson, but she said nothing.

"Not a bad fellow, Robinson," he said finally. "But rather too dogmatic, I thought."

Caroline emptied the contents of an ash tray into the fire. "We always think people who don't agree with us are dogmatic," she said.

"No, that's not true," Charles protested. "In the first place I agreed with a good deal of what he said, and in the second place . . ."

"Besides," she interrupted, straightening a lampshade, "if you feel strongly about a thing you must be dogmatic about it. You must be convinced you're right before you can accomplish anything in this world."

"His attitude toward me," said Charles, ignoring her statement of the obvious, "was that of a kind teacher toward a young and backward child. When he couldn't find a simple word of one syllable to convey his meaning that he felt I would understand, you, my darling, supplied it for him." He jingled some keys in his pocket and smiled. "But, as I say, not a bad fellow. He reminds

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me of myself at his age." As she made no answer, he asked: "How did you like Mrs. Chalmers?"

"I thought her very decorative," said Caroline, smoothing the loose cover of the sofa and tucking it in at the corners. "Superficially intelligent and, on the whole, very nice. But I can't feel any real enthusiasm for parasites."

"She has had a very sad life, I think," said Charles.

"Well," replied Caroline, "I can think of nothing sadder than having no occupation."

Charles decided to lead the conversation back to Mr. Robinson.

"Caroline, you haven't been very frank with me about this fellow Robinson. You never even mentioned him until yesterday. I don't like questioning you. I never did. But I do expect you to tell me about your friends. Hang it all, I won't be treated like an ordinary parent. You've been on the defensive lately. Why is it?"

There was nothing more for her to tidy, so she stood looking at Charles with a sort of hard frankness.

"Why? Because I knew you'd take up exactly the attitude you have toward Phil."

Charles was astounded. His hand strayed to his hair and began twisting a lock of it.

"But—my darling—I've taken up no attitude.

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I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings by criticising him. In this house we've always said pretty frankly what we thought about people. Perhaps it's a bad habit." Then something in her face struck into his heart. "Caroline!" He went toward her and turned her about so that she faced the light. "Caroline—good God—you're not in love, are you?"

"No!" she cried angrily, almost fiercely. "No!"

"Thank Heaven!" He let her go, unspeakably relieved.

"You'd better let me explain," she said, her colour rising, "now that we've got so far. The words 'to be in love' have no meaning for me or for Phil. But we prefer each other to anyone else, we care for the same things, and we mean to work for the same things, and as soon as we can we're going to marry."

"Caroline!"

He stood staring at, rather than into, those clear blue eyes, for he got no further than the surface of them.

"I didn't mean to tell you so soon. We can't be married for two months or more. When we do, it will be in a registry office, of course. And by that time I shall be over twenty-one, you know, father."

"Good God!" he cried again.



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He walked to the sofa and sat down, and for some seconds he neither moved nor spoke. Then he put out an arm toward her and she saw the emotion in his face.

"Please come here."

She went to him slowly, and sat down beside him. He put his arm about her. At last he said:

"Caroline, this hurts me terribly. Do you mean it?"

"Certainly I mean it. Why not?"

"You do love him then? Oh, damn it, don't trifle with words! You want him; you want to live with him; he wants to live with you. You want to spend your lives together."

"As to that," she said with a flicker of a smile, "we'll see."

"Oh, for God's sake, don't pose for a minute. I'm willing to concede you're everything that's advanced and modern. I don't give a damn for that. What are you going to live on? Can he support you? Yes, I know you'll help. Will you be happy? Will you be comfortable, even? Do you really care for him as much as all this? Enough to make you want to leave your home, and Venetia, and me? No, no, I don't want to be selfish. I'm trying not to be. But, my darling, you're barely twenty-one. It's so young. Will he be good to you? Can you depend on him?"

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"Father, father," said Caroline, smiling and softening a little, "you do run wonderfully true to form. As a parent, I mean. I know I'm young. So much the better. I do want to live with Phil, and work with him. He hasn't much money. Together we'll have about seven hundred a year, including what I'm earning at present. Then," she added, "there's my mother's allowance. I thought if you wanted to give me that or part of it . . ."

"Your mother's allowance stopped years ago."

She looked quickly at him.

"What do you mean?"

"She sent word through her lawyers that she would have to reduce it. She'd been very extravagant. I asked her to discontinue it altogether. I always hated having to take it, and for the last three years I haven't needed it."

"You ought to have told us," she said.

He admitted that he ought. "I don't know why I didn't. Except that I wanted you to go on thinking she was doing something for you."

"But I don't want to think it if it isn't true. Why should I? She's nothing to me." After a moment's silence she said: "Never mind. I don't want or expect you to give me any money after I'm married, so we'll manage on seven hundred. Phil is sub-editor of the *Vanguard*, and he says if I do well I may get a raise in about a year. And

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when we can find time we're going to write a book together. We don't care about clothes, nor about gaieties. High thinking and plain living," she added, "that's what we like."

Charles felt that she had drawn nearer to him. She was less hard and guarded. In her present mood he saw that he might easily have alienated her. And never had he loved her more than at this moment.

"Caroline, darling," he cried in a sort of despair, "I only want you to be happy. What else could I want?"

"You always said," she reminded him, "that it was childish to expect happiness. Well, I don't expect it. But I know I shall get the most out of my life by marrying Phil."

"I used the word in its relative sense," said Charles. "I couldn't bear to see you unhappy."

"If I ever am," she said, "you must look upon it as a necessary experience for me."

He was silent for a moment.

"Does Venetia know?" he presently asked.

"No. No one knows."

Charles said, staring in front of him:

"I hoped you wouldn't marry for years yet. Oh, Caroline, why must you rush into it? Wait. Wait. I've never tried to prejudice you against marriage, but I never could see that it was a

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suitable adventure for the very young. I dread it for you. I've always dreaded it."

"For us?" she asked. "Or for yourself because you don't want to lose us?"

"Both, both. I'm selfish. I admit it. I thought we were so happy."

"You dread it," she said, "partly because you had a very unfortunate experience yourself, but, father, you must blame yourself, not marriage, for that. I hold no brief for it as an institution, nor does Phil. I'm marrying him because I want his constant companionship, and I can't conveniently get it in any other way. But you must blame your own lack of judgment for the failure of your own marriage."

Charles said, defiantly:

"I don't regret it. I have you and Venetia." He added: "And if ever I have cause to accuse you of lack of judgment I hope I can refrain from doing so."

"But you may do so," she said with a bright look at him, "if it's true."

He got up. Caroline, he told himself, defeated him. It was impossible to say where her hardness and pose ended and her admirable honesty began.

"I must talk to this fellow," he said, harshly. "I must see his parents. You can't go off and get married as if you were a foundling."

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"You may see them, of course," she said. "They will want to see you." She added: "They're very fond of me."

He turned away from her toward the door, his face averted from her. Something in the look of his shoulders, in the strained turn of his head, touched her. She sprang up and flung an arm about his neck. She felt his grief, his deep hurt, and was moved by it. The tears rushed to her eyes.

"Dear father . . . you're so young somehow. I feel years older than you to-night. It's all right. Everything's all right. You'll like and admire Phil when you know him better. And I do love you . . ."

Her voice broke. Charles could say nothing at all. He held her tightly against his side for an instant, then, without showing her his face, pushed her gently from him and went out of the room and into his own bedroom. She heard him close his door softly.

There was absolute silence in the house. She stood with her hand on the electric light switch, listening. Charles, she knew, was standing in the middle of his room, stricken by this new thing, trying to realise what it was going to mean to him, and to all of them. This first break . . .

She snapped off the light and went slowly and very quietly upstairs.

## *Chapter VII*

CAROLINE paused outside Venetia's door and listened. There, too, there was silence. After some hesitation she tapped very lightly with her finger-nail, and Venetia heard her at once and called out:

"Come in. I'm awake. I haven't been to sleep."

She felt for the light and switched it on.

"I didn't know whether you'd feel like talking or not. It's pretty late," Caroline said.

Venetia lay in bed with a blue silk eider-down drawn up to her chin. She flung an immature and lovely arm over her eyes for an instant, then uncovered them and raising herself in bed, looked with a bright expectant face at Caroline. Her dark hair was in soft disorder and her cheeks were flushed.

"Caroline, what fun! You hardly ever come in and talk any more. I'm not a bit sleepy. Come and sit on the foot of the bed."

"I'll sit here, thanks," said Caroline, taking a small armchair near the fireplace.

"Well, light the gas then, and shut the window. It's icy, except under the bed-clothes."

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Caroline did as she was told and resumed her seat. She hardly knew what to say, or where to begin; her talk with her father had shaken and moved her, and now that she was there in Venetia's room, the scene of many confidences of an intimate nature, and many youthful speculations, her news seemed astonishing and improbable even to herself. Seeing that she was in some difficulty, Venetia came to her assistance.

"I thought the dinner party went off wonderfully well. Marie really is a marvel. Caroline, don't you think Mrs. Chalmers is terribly attractive? I do."

"She seems very nice," said the more temperate Caroline, "and she's certainly good to look at. But I don't find these very *mondaine* women as attractive as you do."

"I don't think she's that at all," Venetia objected. "On the contrary, I thought she was very simple. She seemed to me to be trying to get her bearings all the time, as though she were wondering about us all a lot. I liked that. And I love her accent. I think she's a darling."

As Caroline had no desire to pursue that subject further, and seemed unprepared to introduce another, there was a short silence. Venetia broke it by saying:

"I hope Mr. Robinson enjoyed himself. Do you think he did?"



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Caroline said she thought he had. Then she seized her opportunity.

"But of course it was very trying for him, coming here for the first time like that. I hope you liked him. Did you?"

"Why trying? Everybody has to go somewhere for the first time. You might as well say it was trying for us, having him here for the first time."

"I mean, he probably felt he was being inspected. Especially as he knows he's the first man I've ever asked here to dine."

Venetia flashed a penetrating look at her. The vague suspicion that had been flitting through her mind took root and became a conviction.

"Caroline, I do believe you're really interested for once."

Caroline turned her head away and looked into the fire. Her heart was beating violently, and she controlled her voice with care.

"Well, never mind that for a moment. Answer my question first. Did you like him or not?"

Without looking at Venetia's face she could feel the restraint and reserve with which she answered. They were in her voice. It was exactly what she had expected—what she was arming herself against.

"I wish you wouldn't make such a point of my

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liking or not liking him. I don't know him. At the moment I can only say that he seemed very nice, but that he isn't . . . well, isn't exactly my sort. That's nothing against him. As I say, I don't know him."

"If he had been your sort," Caroline said evenly and coldly, "he wouldn't have liked me, nor I him. It's no good pretending we like the same sort of men. We don't. You like Clive. He's a type. He's everything that's well-bred, and correct, and conventional. Well, you like that type. I don't." She added: "Mind you, I don't dislike Clive at all. It's the type that I dislike."

Venetia said very tensely and quietly:

"And I don't dislike Mr. Robinson, in exactly the same way."

She couldn't discuss Clive. He was not food for discussion, but only for the most secret and exquisite thoughts. She knew what she was sure no one else in the world knew of him. Her sensitive and perceptive mind had seen and was delighting in his valiant and inquiring spirit; in his tenderness, and in his quick and passionate response to the least sign of tenderness in her; in his willingness to give his body to his country provided he could keep his ideas to himself. There was a young ardour in him, both mental and physical, which she understood and adored.

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She had never discussed Clive with anyone. She never could nor would. Since that last evening they had spent together at the Berkeley, when they had talked frankly and endlessly, she had no longer any thought of resistance or of coquetry. Her one desire now was to show herself to him as she was. When she was with him she felt that her whole personality was deepened and strengthened; without him she was an animated shell, the mere outward appearance of herself. And there was no one on earth to whom she could confide these things, or to whom she wished to confide them.

But Caroline reacted differently to love. Now that Phil had been seen by and was established in the minds of her father and sister, she longed to talk about him. She proceeded to tell Venetia about his gifts, about his popularity and influence, and about his parents. Venetia passed, as she talked, from utter amazement to acceptance and final understanding of what was now, obviously, a fact to be considered and reckoned with. Caroline was not only interested in this man, she meant to marry him. That was perfectly clear, astounding though it was. She presently said as much, looking at Venetia with that same hard and defiant frankness that had so nonplussed Charles.

"And we're going to marry as soon as I'm twenty-one. In a registry office, of course. I

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told father to-night. I had just been telling him before I came in to tell you."

Venetia fought down her own feelings, feelings that were too chaotic and too painful to be allowed examination at the moment, much less utterance. She responded valiantly. It was her nature to respond, and here was a situation demanding much from her in the way of sisterly feeling. She saw that Caroline meant all and more than she had said; that she was at a crisis in her life; that she was exalted and happy as she had never been before. She knew that Caroline had been secretly wounded a hundred times by her own greater popularity and charm. She deplored it and understood it and regretted it, and she knew that this hardness and defiance she now showed were partly caused by it. She felt that she could now make up to Caroline for a superiority she had never sought, for a success that had perhaps given her sister bitter hours, and yet was no fault of hers.

"Oh, Caroline . . . it's so queer and new." Tears came into her eyes. "I'll try to know him and like him, I promise you. I'll do anything I can if you're really certain in your own mind about him. Reach me that handkerchief on my dressing-table, will you? Thanks . . ." She wiped her eyes. "What did father say? Tell me *exactly*. Was he terribly upset?"

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Caroline dealt with the interview fairly and justly.

"I meant to console him," she said, "by pointing out how lucky he was to have twins. He won't miss me so much, as he has you. And I know you won't dream of marrying for years yet. You'll go on making men fall in love with you till you're thirty or more, I expect. I'm not blaming you. If I enjoyed it as much as you do, I'd do the same, I suppose, but I don't."

"I don't enjoy it as much as you think," said Venetia in a low voice. "And I don't make them."

"Oh, Venetia, if you didn't . . . why, just this last year there's been Edwin Harpenden, and Cyril Stedman-Reid, and Frank Stoddard, and Clive Cary . . . and next year there'll be twice as many more, because you'll be still more attractive. I suppose it's a fortunate thing you're like that, because I can't imagine father living alone."

Venetia said, with a rigid face and body:

"I can't imagine him living alone either."

"But if you ever do eventually marry," Caroline observed, "he'll simply have to face it. I don't believe in children sacrificing themselves for their parents."

"Father's different," Venetia said. "He'd never ask it or expect it. He'd just suffer, by

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himself. It isn't as though he liked people. He only likes us."

"He ought to marry again," said Caroline.

Venetia turned her head and looked at her.

"Caroline, you're getting terribly hard."

"Hard?"

"Yes, hard. I don't know what's making you."

"Is it hard to say that father ought to marry again?"

"Yes, it is, when you know he'd hate it, and you only want him to for your own sake."

"It makes no difference whatever to me," Caroline protested. "I shan't be here. I was thinking of his good, and yours."

Venetia looked straight before her. Her arms lay inertly on either side of her narrow body.

"Never mind about me. I'll always be here to look after him. That's my job. I'll never marry. Never."

Caroline glanced quickly at her.

"Are you angry with me for wanting to marry Phil, and go away? Did you think I'd be the one to stay? I suppose you did."

"Angry? No, why should I be? It's the sort of thing you just leave to the future to take care of."

"I'm glad you feel like that," said Caroline.

"And I hope you'll be happy and that everything will be all right. Only you can't expect me

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to rejoice and be delighted. It's too sudden, and I don't know him . . . that's all."

"I know him," said Caroline, "through and through. And there isn't one thing in him I'd change. No, not one little thing."

Venetia caught her breath and her eyes closed suddenly.

"Let's talk about it to-morrow," she said in a low voice.

"Perhaps we'd better stop now," agreed Caroline. "It's long after one, and I've got to be at the office by nine. Shall I put out the fire?"

"Please."

She turned out the gas, re-opened the window, and went to the door. Venetia lay with her eyes closed.

"Good-night, Venetia."

"Good-night, Caroline, dear."

Caroline paused, wondering if Venetia expected her to kiss her. She was very undemonstrative herself, and such exhibitions of feeling always made her uncomfortable. She turned off the light without saying anything more, and softly closed the door. She went into her own room, which was like a room in a nursing home, and quickly undressed. When she was ready for bed she took Phil Robinson's photograph—taken by a Hampstead photographer—out of her writing-



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table and looked long at that intense, earnest, fanatical face. Then she slipped it under her pillow and got into bed.

That night she was the only happy one in the house.

## *Chapter VIII*

LYDIA and Charles paused in front of a Mantegna. The pictures had failed to engage their whole attention, which was not surprising in view of the news Charles had to impart. He had been telling her about Caroline, and she had listened with the keenest interest and sympathy, asking a question here and there, fully aware of Charles's pain, which he tried to hide, but not failing to point out to him the inevitableness of the thing.

"Yes, that's lovely," she said. "The face of that child is exquisite—and those reds in the dress. But surely you realise it had to come, sooner or later."

Sooner or later. That was just it, he explained. He had counted on its coming later. Ten years later. But no, at the first—at almost literally the first opportunity—his daughter was ready to rush into the arms of a comparative stranger.

"It isn't decent," he protested. "Good God! I may be a grandfather by this time next year."

Lydia found this very laughable. He looked

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little more than thirty to-day. His suit, of some brownish mixture, became him. He wore a new felt hat. His clean-shaven face was always youthful, and at the moment it was even boyish. He made his protest against fate humorously. He was genuinely unhappy, but he saw the absurdity of his own position.

"Are you ready to swear," she asked, "that that fact isn't the real cause of your worry?"

Charles swore, somewhat indignantly, that it wasn't. The thought of being a grandfather had only just occurred to him as a probability, and he admitted that he found the idea shattering.

"But that's neither here nor there," he said. "The point is, is Robinson a good fellow or isn't he? Is she or is she not making a ghastly mistake? Could I prevent it? Ought I to try to prevent it? And how?"

"How indeed?" she asked. "You couldn't, in the case of an independent and determined girl like Caroline. She seems to know what she wants perfectly well. You may or may not like the young man, but from what I've seen of them I think they were made for each other. Why, they're the very echo of each other."

"Revolting!" exclaimed Charles.

"Wonderful, and rather mysterious," she said, "when you realise they've only known each other a few months. But it's true all the same. With

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a girl like that, interference would only be mischievous and useless. I wouldn't try it, if I were you."

"I'm not going to try it," he said. "I agree with you. I don't like Robinson. That is, I would never have chosen him for a son-in-law. But I think he'd always do the right thing by Caroline. I believe he'll *cherish* her, if you understand what I mean. He's a pacifist when one country makes war upon another, and yet he'd doubtless arm himself to the teeth in a political struggle, if he believed force was necessary. I can even imagine him contemplating a world revolution which would make millions of widows and orphans, and flinching at the sight of a dead sparrow. I can imagine him on a platform hurling abuse and strong words at his opponents that would make a sergeant-major blush, and then going home and singing lullabies to the baby after he'd given it its bath. That's the sort of fellow he is. A little mad, hopelessly illogical, mentally confused, of course, but capable of being a tender and loving husband and father. Do you think I've been fair to him?"

"You've drawn him," she said, "as he is."

Charles sighed, and they walked on into another room.

"Well, well," he said, "I mustn't complain. I have Venetia."

"What about that perfectly charming Captain Cary?" she inquired.

"Oh, you like him, do you? So do I. I always wish he'd call me Charles." He added: "Thank Heaven there's nothing in that."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Perfectly. It's just one of Venetia's little flutters. She's had dozens, and she'll have dozens more. No man with eyes in his head can fail to find her attractive, and she knows it, and enjoys it, quite naturally. She's never unkind. There's nothing of the cold coquette about her. She likes men too much for that."

"But I feel all the same," she persisted, "that there's something more than just liking between those two."

He turned and looked at her.

"Are you trying to frighten me?" he asked.

It was the first time he had seen her dressed in anything but black. She was wearing a brown tailor-made, a small brown felt hat, a little brown fur around her neck. Charles found her far more approachable and also more attractive than before. She seemed less remote, and less like a heroine of one of Mr. Henry James's novels. He had always felt he would be frightened of these ladies, and he had begun by finding Lydia, for all her friendliness and charm, a little alarming. To-day they were, for no reason that he

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could find, on much easier terms with one another.

She shook her head.

"No, of course not. But I should be prepared, if I were you. It's no use living in a fool's Paradise."

"It's the only one I know of," said Charles.

"I mean, she's certain to want to marry, and sooner than you think." She added: "She's lovely, and so unspoilt. Oh, an exquisite girl, I think."

They paused in front of a Botticelli and contemplated it. Charles turned abruptly away.

"Well, when they both leave me, I shall become a recluse and read Plato, only emerging from my retirement to go to the City and make more money. A recluse," he said, throwing back his head, "with a damned good cellar and a damned good cook."

Lydia smiled. "The prospect doesn't excite my pity."

"It ought to," said Charles.

"If you hadn't mentioned the cellar and the cook, perhaps . . ."

"They would merely be gestures of defiance," he explained.

"After all," she said, "it's no worse than what I have to look forward to myself. And I'm less interested in food and drink. No, I shan't waste any pity on you. I shall reserve it for lonely old

women, and over-worked horses, and for myself, at odd moments."

Charles turned suddenly and looked at her.

"What a nice woman you are," he said.

She laughed and coloured a little, his remark was so unexpected.

"Yes, I am," she admitted. "Where's that Francesca you were going to show me? The one with the angels in it."

Charles looked at his watch.

"We've just time for that," he said. "I must be back at the office by three. We'll do this again. A short lunch, and then half an hour or so here afterwards."

Lydia said she would be glad to, and he immediately wondered why he had suggested a repetition of it. Once was delightful. Twice would be less pleasant. Three times would be tiresome. He would have to watch himself. The irresistible and human desire to please at the moment was getting the upper hand.

Not that he didn't enjoy being with her. He did, surprisingly. Her oval face and clear grey eyes, her fair hair, very soft, like a child's, her voice with its transatlantic inflection, her quiet elegance, all pleased him. And he liked her mind. It was not too feminine. It had a way of not shying at facts. He found her a very companionable woman altogether. And she never bored



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him. She wasn't constantly comparing her own nation with his. She didn't discuss the prices of things *ad nauseam*. She seemed to have accepted England quite calmly and without effort, and while she undoubtedly observed much and made pointed comments now and again, she was never exclamatory, nor was she moved to silly mirth by little differences of speech or of custom.

Rupert Hinkson's letter, which had arrived a few days previously, had overstated nothing. All the same, charming as she was, it was a relief to him to hear that she had re-found old friends. Now that spring had come to England, people were returning from the South; from the Riviera, from Algiers, from Egypt. She spoke of a Madame de Ferrière, an American who had married a Frenchman, and who was now in London, and of a Mrs. Wilmot, an Englishwoman she had once met on the train going to the Lakes. She would soon find plenty of people to amuse her, and to like. She told him she had two theatres and a ball in prospect within the next few days.

He was glad to hear it, for her own sake. And, besides, he wanted to see as much as possible of Caroline, of Phil, whose better acquaintance he felt it very necessary to make, and, as always, of Venetia. He didn't want to lose a moment of her loved society that she was willing to bestow on him. And in his spare time he

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wanted to get on with his anthology. Rupert Hinkson had spoken of it in his letter.

"There aren't enough good prose anthologies," he said. "There is considerable demand for them here, where people have little time for browsing among books and like something they can pick up and put down again."

They emerged from the doors of the Gallery and stood for a moment under the portico, looking out over Trafalgar Square. She asked Charles if he would come and dine with her one night at the Berkeley and bring Venetia. She would ask Captain Cary, too, if Charles were willing.

"Just the four of us," she said, "and we can dance, if you do dance. Do you?"

Charles said he didn't; he only liked the polka, and it had recently gone out—well, twenty years or so ago. Lydia said she didn't care particularly about dancing, either.

"But the other two can. Or don't you want them to be thrown together?"

"They throw themselves together anyway," said Charles. "What's the difference?"

He put her into a taxi.

"You might lunch with me again the day after to-morrow," he said, "if you've nothing better to do."

She said she hadn't, and she would. He walked

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to the Strand to take a bus to the City, and wondered why he had asked her, and so soon.

"The worst of these social contacts," he said to himself, "is that you want to put an artistic finish to each meeting and the only way to do that is to arrange for another meeting." He bought an afternoon paper and swung himself on a bus, where he mounted to the top. "If I had simply said good-bye and shut the cab door, the thing would have been incomplete. Not that she cares whether she sees me again or not; but she might have felt she'd failed to make herself sufficiently agreeable. And so it goes on. It's all very pointless and silly."

He felt more than a little depressed and irritated. He had promised to go with Caroline to see the Robinsons in their home in Hampstead after dinner that evening, and the prospect did not add gaiety to his mood. He had a horror of high-brows, and he felt certain that the Robinsons deserved the name, and that they would talk earnestly about all the things he wanted to take lightly, and would take lightly all the things he wished to talk about seriously.

"But one good thing about high-brows is," he said to himself, "that they place no importance at all on relations by marriage. Thank God for that."

He and Caroline took the underground after

dinner in spite of his assurance that he was perfectly willing to pay for a taxi. When they emerged from the station it was raining, and there were no taxis to be had there. Caroline, dressed in a plain, dark afternoon dress and her winter hat and coat—the fur of the latter a little worn and shabby—put up her umbrella and walked beside him cheerfully, telling him of the excellences of the family they were about to visit.

"They have only one maid," she said, "and they call her Miss Spaggit."

"I dare say it serves her right," said Charles.

She ignored this. "She comes from what's called the servant class," she explained, "and think what it must mean to her."

"I don't know," said her father, turning up the collar of his coat; "if I were a footman I should prefer to be called Charles. I shouldn't mind Lester much, though it would remind me of school, but if they called me Mr. Lester I'd give notice."

Caroline was silent for a moment.

"Mr. Robinson, Phil's father, is the kindest man in the world," she said. "But you may find him a little abrupt sometimes."

"I shall love that," answered Charles. "If there's a quality in my fellow-man which really pleases me it is that one. Lack of abruptness is

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entirely responsible for social boredom. Only in abruptness do you find wit, my darling. And epigrams, think of them. If Mr. Robinson is only sufficiently abrupt with me I shall take him to my heart and love him like a brother."

"I think you're being very flippant and rather tiresome," she remarked.

"Flippant, yes," agreed Charles, "but I hope not tiresome."

"Yes, both," she insisted.

He took her arm.

"Caroline, darling, it's only to keep the tears away."

"How absurd you are, father," she said more gently, "to be making such a fuss. It isn't as if you were going to lose me."

"It feels just the same," Charles answered.

They reached a door in a wall and opened it, and walked up a short path, bordered with dripping laurels to a small semi-detached house of yellow brick. Caroline rang the bell and the door was almost instantly opened by Phil Robinson. He was wearing a grey flannel suit and a soft collar, and his hair seemed to Charles deliberately uncombed. He carried a tin coffee-pot in one hand, and Charles, as he shook the other, wondered if this were a calculated effect, and decided, generously, that it wasn't.

"Just in time. I was taking the coffee in when

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the bell rang," said Phil heartily. "Take off your wraps, good people." He set the coffee-pot on the hall table, and helped Caroline off with her coat. "Caroline, my dear child, you're very wet. Go straight in by the fire. At once!"

"She would come by underground," grumbled Charles, concerned at the dampness of his daughter's clothes.

"It's the only way to come," said Phil. "But she ought to have worn a waterproof instead of that cloth thing."

They followed Caroline into the next room and found her talking to a middle-aged man and woman. Mr. Robinson was tall, like his son, but bearded and stooping, and less aggressive. Mrs. Robinson, who wore an ancient dress of flowered silk, was a handsome, upright woman, with good features and an abundance of dark, heavy hair streaked with grey, which she wore in two large coils over her ears.

The room was plainly furnished, and was like a thousand other rooms. The woodwork and floor were painted dark blue, the walls were distempered in white. They were adorned with coloured reproductions—German reproductions, Charles thought—of some of the best-known Dutch paintings, and a few photographs of the Swiss Alps. There were woven rugs on the floor, made, probably, by some village industry. There

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were a number of small bookcases filled with books, and the centre table was loaded with tidy piles of papers and periodicals. The chairs and sofa were covered with sober brown linen.

Mr. and Mrs. Robinson were very friendly. Nobody was at all nervous, with the exception of Charles. Caroline was like a trout swimming happily in the waters of its own pool. She basked; she darted here and there; she played; she rose gracefully after flies. She was in her element. She was looked upon as the dear daughter of the house. Charles, fighting down his jealousy and pain, realised that they loved her, but that they loved someone who was almost a stranger to him. The Robinsons laughed and joked and made puns, but their very merriment had in it a consciousness of their distance from him.

"You are not one of us," they seemed to say, "but we will try to disguise that fact by being very jovial and merry, and showing you that we understand good fellowship."

Mr. Robinson, with his bearded, near-sighted and rather lugubrious face, was, to Charles, by far the most interesting of the three. He was abrupt, as Caroline had said, but his words had point and sometimes humour. He was one of a small firm of printers, and there was a flavour of ink and presses and hurry about him that



Charles rather liked. Mrs. Robinson was too much a mother and a female citizen to be merely a woman. She was, in fact, aggressively a mother and a citizen. Phil was aggressively a son. Just as, Charles imagined, he would one day be aggressively a husband.

The coffee was excellent. Phil had made it himself, Miss Spaggit's hours being from seven in the morning to seven in the evening. She prepared the evening meal, with Mrs. Robinson's help. After that her time was her own.

The food in that house, Charles imagined, would be efficiently cooked, in paper bags, probably. It would be selected less for its taste than for its nutritive properties. The Robinsons were not, to his surprise, vegetarians.

"It's ridiculous," Phil said, "to make all this fuss about killing animals when we permit cruelty toward our own kind to continue all through the ages. I'd rather be a well-fed animal on my way to the slaughter-house than be condemned to a life of poverty and wretchedness in a slum."

"Yes, better the abattoir than the almshouse, perhaps," said Charles.

"The endless agony of the poor . . ." began Mrs. Robinson, but she was interrupted by her husband, who had been silent for some time.

"Man's inhumanity to man," he said, "makes countless thousands pawn."

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This little joke was not very well received. Charles suspected that Mr. Robinson had a mind that recognised no closed season for joking. If he saw an opportunity he slipped one in, while Phil and his mother followed certain rules. "This subject we will take very seriously," he imagined them saying. "This one we will treat with levity."

They told Charles he must be very proud of Caroline. It was not entirely through Phil's influence that she had been put on the regular staff of the *Vanguard*, but chiefly through her own merits.

"We expect great things of her," they said.

Charles's heart ached.

"She's not mine any more," he said to himself. "I have suffered and planned and sweated and loved in order that these Robinsons might be pleased with her. It would be better to give one's children up to the State—whatever they mean by that—at the age of six, and spare oneself this intolerable pain."

The subject of her marriage with Phil was not touched upon till the end of the evening. Neither Caroline nor the Robinsons alluded to it, and Charles could not bring himself to speak of it. But Mr. Robinson, whose thoughts had evidently been running on the subject for some time, said

suddenly to Charles while the others were toying with the Einstein theory:

"Well, well, we marry them, do we? And when?"

Charles turned to him and said: "Must we marry them yet? It's only a week since I first heard of it."

"Oh, better marry them," said Mr. Robinson, his near-sighted, bearded face close to Charles's. "They're meant for each other. There's no doubt about that. Better marry them, my friend."

"We've decided to get married next month," said Caroline, who had heard the word "marry." "After I'm twenty-one. My birthday's May the fifteenth."

Said Charles with a gesture of the hands: "What have I got to do with it? I didn't bring them together. I can't separate them. I suppose they must marry when they please."

"That's the sensible view to take," said Mrs. Robinson. "Caroline owes it to herself and to the community to do whatever makes for her own happiness and development."

"If she knows," agreed Charles, "what makes for it. If she knows that, she knows more than most of us do."

He suddenly liked Mrs. Robinson, with her air of the alert and competent female citizen, the least of the three.

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"We do know," said Phil, his eyes glistening behind his glasses. "We never doubted it from the first moment we met."

"Caroline," explained Mrs. Robinson, "will be infinitely more valuable to the world as a happy wife and mother than she could be in any other way. She'll fulfil herself in every respect. She'll even write better. You'll see."

"The point is," said Caroline sweetly but succinctly, "not *shall* we, but *when* shall we? I think either May the seventeenth or the eighteenth. Which do you think, father?"

Charles said it was immaterial to him, except that he favoured the eighteenth slightly as being twenty-four hours later.

Phil said, making a wry face, that he supposed they ought to talk about money. Charles, however, had no intention of talking to him in front of his mother and father, and as he couldn't very well invite him into his own dining-room, he asked him to lunch with him in the City the next day.

When Charles said it was time for them to go, Phil, with clumsy determination, got Caroline out of the room first and alone, and Charles saw, by the complacent looks on the faces of the older people, that the intelligentsia responded in much the same way as the bourgeoisie when it came to the good-night kiss of an engaged couple. The kiss or kisses went on for a considerable time,

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while Charles fidgeted and made conversation. At last Caroline came in with her hat and coat on, and her eyes shining, followed by Phil with Charles's hat and coat. In the hall, by the front door, they were asked to speak softly, because Miss Spaggit was presumably asleep in a room adjoining. Phil followed them to the gate, talking heartily with Charles, while Mr. and Mrs. Robinson stood at the top of the steps calling "Good-night" and saying it was a pity it was so wet, like any less earnest and intelligent host and hostess. Charles heard Phil whisper to Caroline as he parted from her at the gate: "Good-night, you little love," and his heart softened. The fellow loved her, at any rate. That was indisputable. But, oh, this marriage . . . !

"It's like putting your daughter into a dangerous scenic railway with a stranger beside her, and watching her whirled away out of your sight," he thought.

Caroline said, as they walked back to the underground station: "You did like them, didn't you, father?"

He found it impossible to say what he really thought, so he assured her that he did. They were types, especially Phil and his mother. They were ready to do battle, violently, for all the ideas that no one with any imagination or any heart disputed. They assumed a callousness on the

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part of the rest of mankind that Charles found intensely irritating. They seemed to say:

"We stand for a fair deal for everybody alike. You, wallowing in your trough with the other pigs, have never thought about this, and now that we are forcing you to think about it you will oppose it." Charles wanted to answer:

"The pain and the tragedy and the apparent injustice of things has afflicted me ever since I could think. It is a part of me. Let us agree to accept all that, tacitly, and go on to the remedies, if there are any."

"Mother Kate," said Caroline—it was her name for Mrs. Robinson—"has the biggest heart in the world. I do think I'm lucky to be marrying into such a family."

"And they," said Charles, "are not unfortunate in acquiring my Caroline."

The bitterness in his words was lost on her.

"I really believe," she said, "that they feel that too."

It was nearly twelve when they got back to the house. The rain had stopped, the pavements were drying, and a few stars were visible. They saw lights in the upper windows, and Charles said:

"Venetia's back already. It's early for her."

He opened the door with his key and they went upstairs. They found Venetia sitting over the fire, which she had been poking into a flame.

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She had her velvet evening cloak wrapped round her, and was warming her silken shins.

"Don't turn on any more lights, father darling," she said. "It's nice with just the lamp. I lit the fire when I got in. I felt chilly."

"How long have you been back?"

"About an hour or more. Clive and I dined alone, and then we meant to go to that charity ball at Grosvenor House, but we decided we couldn't face it, so I came home."

"I can't imagine how you ever thought of going," said Caroline.

"Oh, shut up, Caroline," said Venetia, with an irritableness unusual in her. "Don't be so damned superior."

The second after she sprang up and kissed Caroline on the cheek, and then kissed Charles.

"Good-night, father darling. I'm going to bed. I was on my feet all day at the studio."

She picked up her bag and went swiftly out of the room. From her clothes as she passed there came a soft silken sound, and a faint odour of Coty's Chypre. But Charles, wondering much, had seen, even in the dim light, that her eyes were red with tears.



## *Chapter IX*

CHARLES watched with a great interest and a little alarm—although he was so sure of his own mind—the quiet and effortless way in which Mrs. Chalmers became one of their small circle. This was due, to a very great extent, to Venetia's appropriation of her. She admired the older woman extravagantly, saw her whenever she had a free afternoon, and urged her to come and dine as often as she found herself with a lonely evening in prospect. It presently became a regular thing for Lydia to dine in Eaton Gardens once a week—an event to which Charles looked forward with a pleasure that was all the keener for having in it a little spice of danger.

She conquered, Charles decided, by comprehending. He never found it necessary to explain anything to her, although sometimes, for the sake of a little argument, she pretended obtuseness. She seemed to know him from the first, as she knew Caroline and Venetia, and Phil Robinson and Captain Cary.

This agreeable faculty came, Charles knew,

from her lonely and contemplative life, and from her sadness. She had suffered, she had felt herself imprisoned, and she had found escape in her own mind. And to Charles this fluidity of thought and of comprehension was her greatest charm, greater, even, than the charm of her person, which was undeniable.

There was no aspect of human life that he considered unfit for or unworthy of contemplation, and he began to contemplate that side of Lydia's existence that was not for the public gaze.

Once, for instance, when he was calling on her with Venetia, the door into her bedroom had been left open and he had been given a glimpse of her toilet table, with a bowl of mauve violas on it, and a row of shining bottles and neatly-placed brushes. The sight released his imagination, and he speculated about her habits and ways and about her private life. He imagined she was the sort of woman who put everything away in tissue paper; that she took great care of her clothes; that she was very fastidious about her underclothes; that she detested disorder; that she slept quietly and lightly and woke a little tired and languid; that she preferred to be alone, if possible, until ten, or perhaps eleven, but that she could smile and talk—she had had twelve years of that—over the morning coffee-pot if she must. He thought she kept some choice book of poems

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by her bed, and perhaps learnt one by heart occasionally; and he felt sure that servants invariably liked her.

He hoped he put a proper value on these things. If she took exquisite care of her person and of her clothes it was because she lacked neither the necessary time nor the money. He did not need Caroline to point this out to him. But there was something in her own attitude toward them that pleased him. She, too, put a proper value on them. And she could not quite rid herself of the idea that they were temporary and transient. Edward's success had been long in coming. It had come, in fact, only a year or two before his death.

"I'm really living for almost nothing," she told Charles. "I've let my flat in New York, and I'm getting such a good rent for it that I can well afford to have these rooms here. So I don't feel I'm being extravagant."

Also it was the first time in her life—since she had been grown up—that she hadn't kept house.

"I did the housekeeping at home before I married," she explained, "because my mother had so many other things to do—club meetings and committees. And after I married I never did anything else. Even in the summer we always took furnished houses in the country. So you can imagine what a treat this is to me."

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Charles, Venetia, and Captain Cary dined with her more than once. One night she asked Caroline and Phil Robinson too, but Caroline said that such places as the Berkeley were not for them, and as it was a warm evening in the beginning of May, she and Phil dined in Soho instead and took the bus and rode to Kew and back.

Charles noticed that Venetia was very unlike herself that evening. The stings she darted at Clive had no compliments in their tails. Nor would she dance very much with him. He danced less with her than with Lydia, who was a little diffident about it, but frankly enjoyed it when she found herself in such capable hands. Venetia, when she did dance, was lovely to watch. Her thin, fluttering skirts drifted about her long legs in the most delightful way. She kept her small dark head close to Clive's, about an inch away, but she seemed to take little pleasure in being with him. There was no light in her eyes, no animation in her face.

"They don't seem very happy to-night," Lydia remarked to Charles.

"Venetia's in one of her moods," he answered. "She's probably preferring Frank Stoddard at the moment. She saw him yesterday, I know."

"I think they're both very unhappy," said Lydia.

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"Do you know of any reason why they should be?" Charles asked her quickly.

She shook her head. "Venetia doesn't confide in me." She added: "Look, she's smiling at him now. That's better."

She was. She was looking up at him and smiling, but it was a smile that was infinitely sad. It was for a moment only, but as it passed both Charles and Lydia saw his arm tighten round her suddenly. At that moment there was a sort of ferocity in his face, and a sort of anguish. It looked harder and more mature. Whatever emotions were possessing them, their dancing remained unchanged and uninterrupted. The floor was not crowded, and they moved among the other dancers with smooth and even rhythm.

"If I were ten years younger," said Lydia, "and thought she didn't want him . . ."

"Come, come," said Charles, "this is a shameful exhibition of weakness on your part. You're succumbing to his physical charms in a way that astounds and shocks me."

"I said if I were ten years younger," she repeated. "Besides, it isn't only his physical charms. He's such a darling, and he has a brain." She leaned toward him. "You would let Venetia marry him if she wanted to, wouldn't you?"

"No," answered Charles definitely. "I'm hanged if I would. I've been too weak about

Caroline. I'm going to make a stand now. If he comes to me with any such preposterous suggestion, I shall tell him to come back in ten years. I imagine he's only got his pay, and besides he's going out to India soon, thank God. It's the place for all presumptuous young men who wish to marry my daughters." He added: "Is it my mission in life to supply young men with wives? It is not."

"Life's too extraordinary," she said suddenly. "If it hadn't been for that train journey down to Devonshire, there wouldn't have been a Venetia."

"How do you know all this?" he demanded.

"Venetia told me, of course."

"I'll thank her not to discuss my private affairs," he said, but his indignation made no impression on Lydia. She didn't believe in it.

"It's her private affair too," she said. "Why shouldn't she talk about her mother?"

"She wasn't her mother then."

She laughed. "How absurd! Besides, I was very much interested."

"Other people's matrimonial troubles are always diverting," he said. "But I would have told you myself if I thought you'd care to hear."

"Please don't think I've been prying," she said quietly. "Venetia came here to tea, and she told me of her own accord."

"My dear Mrs. Chalmers . . ." cried Charles.

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"I feel," she said, "a little as I felt that first day when I rang you up and found you'd never heard of me."

"Well, you were quite wrong, both times. Don't let us have any nonsense of that sort. My only grievance is that you didn't feel enough interest in me to ask me yourself."

"But I did want to ask," she said, meeting his eyes. "Mr. Hinkson told me almost nothing, and you seem to dislike talking about yourself. Of course I wanted to ask. Or rather I wanted you to tell me without my asking."

It was at such moments as this, he thought, that a man said more than he intended to say. He had just said rather more. He had tried to keep their friendship on a purely friendly footing, and now something else was obtruding itself as he had feared it might.

He had no vanity. He didn't suppose for an instant that Lydia was falling in love with him, but he feared that they might, if they continued in this pleasantly intimate way, find themselves in a position that demanded the consideration, at least, of that thing he hated and dreaded—marriage. He wanted to avoid even so much as a breath of it if he could. What was passing in her mind he had, of course, no idea. At times he thought he merely amused her; at other times he imagined that in her thoughts she had already



married him. He understood the treacherous and volatile nature of thought, and this did not alarm him. What was important was that he should give that thought no basis for existing. Likewise in his own mind he had frequently married Mrs. Chalmers, and while he found certain aspects of this not unpleasing, he recoiled at the idea of tying, once again, that dreaded knot. He had a nightmare horror of it. The noose dangled before him. He was under no obligation whatever to put his head into it, and it occupied, in space, an infinitesimal place. And yet it fascinated him. He found his eyes straying toward it. He had to remind himself that his feet were free to take him from it in any direction that he pleased at any moment.

He saw that he might never have a better opportunity for explaining his position and his point of view.

"Well, now that you've heard," he said, "what my marriage was like and how it ended, you'll understand, perhaps, why I feel as I do about matrimony, and why I'm determined that it shall never happen to me again."

She was looking down, playing with the fastening of her beaded bag, but she raised her eyes as he finished speaking, and smiled, and her little arched eyebrows, more darkly coloured than her

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hair, moved upward as she looked at him, giving her face a look of amused incredulity.

"At least I can understand," she answered, "what a frightful shock the ending of that marriage must have been to you. You were so ridiculously young. You were only a boy."

"I was a man," he said, "by the time I'd finished paying the lawyers' fees. The divorce cost me four hundred pounds, and it took me eight years to pay it off. The wedding—we were married in a little Devonshire church—took about eight minutes. Eight minutes," he repeated.

"Oh, well," she returned, "it takes a whole lifetime to live, remember, and sometimes only one little minute to die."

Then she laid her hand, her long, well-cared-for fingers extended, on the table near him, and she looked directly into his eyes with a look that was purposeful and steady.

"Let's be quite frank with each other," she said. "You and I both know that between two people like ourselves, situated as we are, there are always thoughts about love—speculative thoughts—and probably about marriage. If we examine ourselves at all we must be conscious of them. They will come whether we want them to or not. So I want to say this. I should like to be able to talk quite freely with you without thinking that you're wondering, as you probably are wonder-

ing, if I'm speaking with an ulterior motive. Once and for all, I'm not speaking with an ulterior motive. If I disagree with you on the subject of your marriage, and about marriage in general, it's not because I'm hoping to marry you myself. Let's be quite clear about that. I like you, and I simply adore Venetia, and I'm interested in Caroline. There aren't an awful lot of people who do interest me very much, though I try to make myself believe there are, because I feel I ought to. But with you and your little family, it's different. I just *am* interested. I'm putting my cards on the table, you see. I feel, all the time, that you're thinking you ought to be careful and wary, men and women—especially women—being what they mostly are. But I assure you, I promise you, that with me you need never be."

"Lydia!" cried Charles, instantaneously flattered, moved and piqued, "I thought you an adorable creature when I first met you. Now I'm certain that you are." He put his hand over hers quickly and pressed it. "You've made things a thousand times easier and pleasanter—well, easier, anyhow—by your frankness."

"Thank goodness for that," she said.

"After this, please understand that any remarks I make about women do not include you. You're not women, any more than Venetia and Caroline are. As for marriage, we'll fight it to-

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gether to the last ditch. You probably think exactly as I do, only you won't admit it because you don't think such views becoming in one so lovely, and I dare say you're right."

"I don't think as you do at all," she protested.

"Well, so much the better. I shall have the fun of convincing you. By the way, it may not have escaped your notice that I called you Lydia a minute ago."

"I always have the greatest difficulty in calling you Mr. Lester," she said, smiling.

"Charles to you, then," he said, with that backward movement of the head she found so amusing. Then he turned on her an intense and inquiring gaze. "But look here. You said just now"—he hesitated—"you said you had no desire to marry me yourself. That I can and do believe absolutely. The contrary would lead me to doubt your sanity. Well, perhaps it's only that I have a morbid desire to see myself in someone else's eyes for once, but I'd like immensely to know *why*? Let's hear your reasons. You're a woman who has reasons, thank God. It would interest me enormously to hear them."

She said, laughing and colouring a little, "It's quite true that I have reasons, but you'd only try to prove to me that they were wrong ones."

"Now there you're very much mistaken," he

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answered. "I'm asking you because I really want to know."

"Well, then, it's just morbid curiosity," she said. "You can't possibly really want to know. The truth would only hurt you, and you'll get nothing else from me, I warn you."

Charles was silent for a moment.

"I don't really want to know, then," he said finally. "Anyhow," he added, with exaggerated indifference, "I don't believe in your reasons. Man has reached his quintessence in me. I don't have to prove it. I admit it. Here come the others."

The music had stopped, and Venetia and Clive returned to the table. Venetia looked pale and tired.

"Father," she said, putting her arm through his as she sat down, "I think we ought to go home. It's after twelve."

Lydia protested that it was early to talk of going.

"You've been an angel to give us such a delightful evening," Venetia told her, "and I've loved it, but I really am very tired."

"Bed," said Charles firmly.

Captain Cary turned to Lydia.

"Are you tired, too, Mrs. Chalmers? Or would you stay and dance a little longer? We'll have some supper if you will."

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"Yes, do stay with Clive," Venetia said. "I don't see why everyone should go home because I'm sleepy."

She tried to persuade Charles to stay too, but he wouldn't. He said good-night, thanked Lydia, and put Venetia into a taxi. She pretended to go to sleep with her face against his coat-sleeve, but he wasn't deceived. He could almost feel her thinking. He knew that she was not in her usual spirits, but concluded she had had some little difference with Clive. He thought it best not to question her. As they neared the house she raised her head and spoke.

"Has Caroline settled on a day yet?"

"Yes. May the eighteenth," he answered.

"It's like her to get married in May. She wants to show she takes no interest in pagan superstitions. Quite right, too. Can you bear the thought of living alone with just me, father?"

"My darling," he exclaimed, "what I can't bear is the thought of living without you."

She pressed his arm with sudden violence.

"You'll never have to."

"I distrust the word 'never,'" he said.

"Well, anyhow, not for ages and years. You needn't think about it."

"I won't think about it until I'm obliged to," he said. "That would be worse than morbid. It would be ghoulish."

## *Chapter X*

FOR some time things went on very quietly and normally. Caroline was rarely at home. She spent her days in the City and most of her evenings in Hampstead. Phil occasionally called on Charles in the City for a "chat." Their talk about money, which took place the day after Charles's visit to Hampstead, had been brief; there had been so little money for them to talk about. Charles found Caroline's future husband something between a kindly bore and a fanatic; he found his jokes clumsy and humourless, and his obvious liking for himself flattering in a sense, but tedious. He seemed to exercise a peculiar fascination for the young man. Phil was both attracted to and puzzled by him. What Charles knew he avoided talking about, unless he wished to oppose some misapprehension or fatuity. What Phil knew he couldn't help talking about, and his knowledge was too often vague and inaccurate. He never knew when Charles might not turn on him, politely, and rend him, and he appeared to take a fearful pleasure in being rent.



## *After Noon*

He said to Caroline one day:

"It's a great pity that a man with your father's intelligence should be on the wrong side." He added: "If he is on the wrong side."

"What do you mean?" she asked quickly.

"I sometimes think," he explained, "that he's on our side all the time and won't admit it."

But Caroline wouldn't hear of that.

"I'm afraid father has a definitely Tory mind," she said.

Venetia, on the other hand, was at home far more than usual. She declined invitation after invitation. Charles heard her at the telephone, saying:

"No, I don't think I will, thank you. I'm fed up with dancing at the moment. No, I've seen all the plays I want to see, and they hardly ever stand seeing twice. Oh, I think it's hardly worth while just dining. Yes, I expect it's only temporary, but it's the way I feel. Besides, I'm working rather hard just now. No, I promise you it's nothing to do with you. It's just me. Next week I may feel differently."

"Or next month or next year," he heard her say once as she hung up the receiver.

Charles was not much concerned at this, and did not think it in any way significant. She had been "off" dancing before, and had returned to it with renewed vigour. And doubtless it was

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possible to be temporarily surfeited with the attentions of young men. Besides, it was true that she was working very hard at the studio. The entire class had competed in a design for a fountain, destined for a small park in the Midlands. Hers had been selected, and she was now executing it. It was a figure of a boy struggling with a large fish. She had spent her month's allowance on the purchase of a whole salmon—she said that of all fish salmon had the best figures—and she explained to Charles how it was kept on ice at night and brought out to be clasped in the small boy's arms by day.

"I have to work on it very quickly," she said. "It won't last long in this weather. My model, who is seven, has got terribly attached to that fish, but I'm afraid we shall have to part with it to-morrow."

He did notice, however, that she was looking thinner and paler, and that she laughed less. When he commented on this she said it was the spring. She always felt a little run down in the spring.

One day Charles came back from the office an hour earlier than usual. The weather had turned delightfully warm, and as he opened the door of his library he saw that the sunlight was lying in a yellow pool on the floor, and that on the white-painted walls was a greenish, reflected light.

## *After Noon*

At the same moment he saw that the black and bony fig tree in the garden—always a very backward tree—was dotted all over with little fans of brightest, vividest green. Charles, who loved the spring too passionately to be happy with it, winced at the sight. Whatever wishes, barely acknowledged, whatever secret mortifications he had, rose up in him and tormented him. Spring always found him unprepared, unequal to its incomparable beauties, unworthy of it. He stood with his hand on the knob of the door, stricken by some obscure pain; and although those gay green fans, and the sunlight lying so warmly on the floor, and the chatter of the birds outside, and the soft air that came in through the window all gave him exquisite pleasure, they reminded him at the same time that he was mortal, and forty-two, and that he needed a new suit, and that he was vulnerable and susceptible to a thousand pangs.

He decided that it would be best to ignore the fig tree and get to work. He had been finding some lovely prose somewhere—yes, he remembered now—in *Green Mansions*. He looked for it on his table, but it wasn't there. He thought he must have left in the drawing-room the night before. He ran lightly up the stairs and opened the door.

Venetia and Clive Cary were sitting on the  
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sofa, their arms wound tightly about each other. They moved apart slowly, realising at once that it was useless to try to assume positions of greater propriety; useless to pretend they hadn't been clinging together like drowning people; useless to imagine that their feelings for each other were not, now, public property, so to speak.

Charles saw that he had surprised these two in the middle of a tragic scene. More tragic, he guessed, than amorous. Venetia's flushed cheeks glistened with tears; Clive's eyes looked large and dark and miserable, and his face was pale. He stood up, facing Charles, while Venetia remained on the sofa, clasping one of his hands in both of hers.

"I'm sorry," said Charles, unspeakably embarrassed. "I came up to get a book."

He felt that the situation was worse for him than for any of them. He hadn't the least desire to play the rôle of outraged parent and cry, theatrically, "What does this mean, sir?" He only wanted to apologise and go away, and shut himself up in his library until Venetia should come to him and put him out of his worst misery by telling him what it meant of her own accord.

But Clive had other plans.

"This requires explanations," he said, "and I mean to give them. I shall be glad to give them."

Venetia was on her feet in an instant.

## *After Noon*

"No, father, no!" she cried. "Don't listen to Clive. Clive, please go away now. I want to talk to father alone. Go away, please, please."

"That's quite impossible," said Clive quietly. He turned to Charles. "Would you mind asking Venetia to let us have a talk alone?"

"Father can ask me as much as he likes," she cried defiantly. "I'm not going. If there's any talking to be done, I mean to do it. Now go, Clive, please."

"All this was my fault, for bursting in," said Charles, backing toward the door, his book in his hand. "If you had left your hat and stick in the hall, Clive, instead of bringing them up here, it wouldn't have happened. No one is called upon to explain anything at the moment." He was sick with dread of what he might have to hear. He turned to the door, avoiding their eyes. "If you want me, later, you'll know where to find me."

But Venetia ran to him and caught his arm.

"No, father, don't go. I can explain everything, and I will, here and now. Clive is going out to India, soon, and I may not see him before he sails, as he'll be very busy. We were saying good-bye. I'm very fond of Clive, and I let him kiss me, and you saw us. That's all there is to tell." She held him by both arms and looked him straight in the face. "That's the truth, as true as my name's Venetia Lester."

## *After Noon*

"My God!" burst out Clive. "That's one of the best told lies I ever listened to."

Charles, standing by the door with his hands in his pockets and his book under his arm, looked from Venetia to Clive. He saw that the young man was angry and desperate. He knew that Venetia, for reasons of her own, was concealing much. Her eyes were flashing with indignation.

"Clive, how dare you? You've no business to interfere like this. This doesn't concern you, and you'd much better go away and leave me to talk to father alone. This is the third time I've asked you to go."

Clive suddenly sprang at her, pinioned her arms to her sides, and, after a short scuffle, pushed her out of the room.

"Father, father!" she cried, as the door was firmly shut on her. "Don't let him—don't——"

"I've stood all I'm going to stand from that girl," said Clive, as he turned the key.

"Oh no, you haven't," Charles told him. "Not if you mean to marry her, and it looks as though you did."

Venetia continued to beat on the door and shake the knob.

"Let me come in! Please let me in, Clive! Father, unlock the door!" There were tears in her voice.

"She's not crying," Clive said. "She's only pre-

## 'After Noon

tending to. I'll unlock the door in a minute." He was breathing fast. "I'd better tell you while I can. We're terribly in love with each other, and she won't marry me because she won't leave you. I've got to go out to India the end of this month, and I want her to come with me. She wants to come. She's making herself desperately unhappy. I wouldn't tell you this if I didn't *know* she loved me, but I do know it, and I adore her utterly, and for ever. I've got to marry her."

Charles walked to the mantelpiece and leaned on it. He couldn't refrain from glancing in the mirror to see if his face showed what he was feeling, and was gratified to find that it didn't. He saw Clive reflected in the glass. He was lighting a cigarette. His hands were shaking and it was plain that he was strung up to a very high pitch of excitement, like a man who knows he is fighting for his life.

"You'd better unlock the door," Charles said calmly. "I have the facts now. And then perhaps we can hear ourselves talk."

Clive turned the key and opened the door, and Venetia walked in. Her apprehensive eyes went at once to her father's face. She knew that he knew, and that it was useless to try to deceive him any more. Charles, his face immobile, left the mantel and took her hand. He led her to the sofa.



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"Well?" he said.

She put her head on his shoulder with a long sigh.

"I'm so sick of pretending," she said. "I'm madly in love with Clive, and if I can't marry him I'll just slowly die. I know exactly what it must feel like to die of love."

"You'd be no good to me dead, my darling," said Charles.

Clive, who had been walking about as though he were too nervous to sit or stand, paused in front of them. "It was just a question," he said, "of who was to make the sacrifice. You, or us. I know what the sacrifice is. She's yours. She's a thousand times more yours than most men's daughters are. And you were only just beginning to get any real satisfaction out of her. And then I come and take her away, and reap all the benefits, and leave you with nothing. It's inevitable, but it's damned hard."

"I subscribe to that," said Charles quietly, "and sign it."

Clive resumed his pacing, every movement, Charles saw, watched by Venetia.

"At first," continued the young man, "I thought she was right, and that we ought to wait. And then when I heard that I was going to India, I knew I couldn't stand it, and she knew she couldn't. There are some sorts of hell no one

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should be called on to endure. Stupid, purposeless hells like that."

"There are," agreed Charles.

"Oh, father," Venetia cried, "what will you do if I go away and leave you?"

He saw her tears starting.

"Never mind me," he said quickly. "Man's an adaptable animal, after all. Let's keep to the business in hand."

"If you only liked people, or clubs . . ."

"Discussion of my personal peculiarities, while interesting, perhaps, is unprofitable," he observed. "I want to know what makes you so sure you want to marry Clive, and go out to India with him, and live the life of a soldier's wife, which, I have always understood, isn't all caviare."

Venetia raised her head and then sat up. She was beginning to be herself again.

"Now it just happens," she said, "that I can tell you exactly. Clive, stop walking for a minute, please. Now, father, look at him. Don't you see that he's the only man I could possibly marry? Look at the way his hair grows, look at his eyes and the shape of his nose, and that Clive-ish chin. Look at his height and his figure, and that beautiful back . . ."

"Shut up, Venetia," said Clive. "We were endeavouring to be reasonable."

"So am I. All those things are reasons. And,

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father, I shall never tire of the way his mind works. He thinks; he comes to conclusions about things, conclusions that I might come to, perhaps, ten years from now. I'm not nearly as clever as he is, and I know it, and I like it. I've got a lot of feeling and I'm intelligent, but I haven't got a really good brain. Very few of us have. But if I stick to Clive there's some hope for me."

"It looks as if I should have to put you out of the room again," warned Clive.

"Let me alone," she said. "Father asked me, and I'm telling him."

"Is there any more?" asked Charles.

"There's an awful lot more. I expect you thought, as Caroline did, that I'd go on having mild affairs with young men for years and years. Well, if I don't marry Clive, that's exactly what I will do, and it's just what I dread and want to avoid. I don't want to go any farther. Clive suits me perfectly. I love his way of thinking; I love his way of living; I love his absolutely uncanny understanding of women. He explains me to myself, and oh, how I needed that! He's thought a lot about women. Not in a silly way, but sensibly and clearly. And if we go wrong anywhere, it will be my fault, not his, because while he's thought things out and come to conclusions about them, I've only dreamed and wool-gathered."

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"He has the advantage of you in years," said Charles.

"It's the only advantage I have or want," Clive answered.

"I'm sorry he's a soldier," Venetia went on, "because, although he admits it to very few people, he doesn't really like soldiering. He's too independent-minded. And that means that he won't be very happy in that way. But he'll have his music, which is a great satisfaction to him, and he'll have me. And those two things are enough to keep anybody interested."

"Perhaps Mr. Lester would like to say a few words now," Clive suggested.

"At the moment, only this," said Charles. "That I would like you to call me Charles."

"Thank you," said Clive, and was too much moved to say more.

Venetia seized her father's arm.

"Oh, if only we weren't going to India," she cried, "what fun we three could have!"

The sharp pain her words gave him made him wince, and for a moment he could say nothing. Then he turned to Clive.

"What would you say if I asked you not to marry Venetia until you come back from India?"

Clive sat down.

"It would mean waiting two or possibly three years," he said.

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"What would you say, Venetia?"

"Why didn't you ask Caroline to wait?" she asked in a low voice.

"I knew she wouldn't wait."

"Do you think I will?"

"I know you will if I ask you to."

"Are you going to ask me to?"

"No," said Charles.

"If you had asked me," she said, "I would have waited."

"I know. That's why I couldn't ask."

"Oh, father! You didn't ask Caroline to wait because you knew she wouldn't, and you don't ask me because you know I would. What a beast I am to leave you . . . but I do want to marry Clive and go away with him so terribly."

"When do you sail, Clive?" Charles asked quietly.

"On the thirty-first of May."

"And this is the twelfth. Good God!"

"I can just do it," Venetia said. "I think Lydia Chalmers would help me with my clothes."

Charles asked, conscious of a twinge of jealousy:

"How much does she know?"

"Only that Clive and I adore each other. She guessed it. She wouldn't advise us, one way or the other, about telling you."

Charles felt the imperative need of action. He

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got up and walked to the mantel again, where he lit a cigarette.

"You and Caroline," he said, "might as well trip to the registry office hand in hand."

"Father, darling," cried Venetia, "don't be sarcastic. I intend to be married in church, very quietly. I only want the family, and Clive's father, of course. I don't want any of my young female friends. They're a horrible bore at a wedding."

"Venetia's done most of the talking, so far," said Clive, sitting on the arm of the sofa with a hand on her shoulder. "I would now like to make a few remarks. I won't go into the question of my feelings for your daughter, Charles. I wouldn't be such a damn fool as to marry her if I didn't adore her. This business of taking a young woman for duration is not a thing to be trifled with. So we'll just pass over all that and get down to business. Besides my pay, I am fortunate enough to have a thousand a year—alas! not exclusive of income-tax—which my mother left to me, and for a soldier, that's riches. And if Venetia ever gets fed up with army life, as she very likely will about the same time I do, I'll retire and find some other sort of job."

"Here in London," she said, "near you, father."

"I shall look forward to that," said Charles, "with great pleasure."

It was Clive who presently realised that they had said enough; that Charles could bear no more; that any emotion now on anyone's part would be unendurable for him.

He got up and took Venetia by the hand.

"This interview," he said lightly, "has gone on long enough for to-day. I'd be very glad, Charles, if you'd lunch with me to-morrow at my club. I hope you can. At one-thirty if that suits you. There are a lot of things I'd like to talk over with you."

"Without me?" asked Venetia.

"My club," said Clive, "is a very chaste club. No women are admitted."

Charles said he would come. He liked the way Clive had taken the initiative. It made him feel less parental, less like the author of his own agony.

"I suppose you two will be dining together to-night," he said.

"We'd like you to dine with us," answered Clive quickly.

"No," said Charles. "Thanks very much. I can't do that."

"Oh, father, why not? We do want you. Please," Venetia begged.

"I already have an engagement," he explained.



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"Then," she said, "we'll dine together to-morrow night. The three of us."

"That," said Charles politely, "I should like very much indeed."

Venetia went to the front door with Clive, and Charles went to his library with his book. When Venetia presently looked in he pretended to be working. She came silently to the table, kissed him, and went away. Three-quarters of an hour later she came in again, dressed for dinner, kissed her hand to him, and said she would be home early. She hesitated at the door, and then said:

"If I say anything to you I'll cry and look hideous. I just want to tell you that I've never been so completely happy and so completely miserable."

She went out, closing the door quickly behind her.

Charles sat at his writing-table for some time after she had gone, his head resting on his hand. The other hand was busy making innumerable round noughts on a sheet of paper. Suddenly he dropped his pen, shot up out of his chair, seized his hat from the hall table and left the house. He walked rapidly in the direction of Buckingham Gate, through leafy Eaton Square; then, meeting an empty taxi, he got in and said:

"To the Café Royal, please."

The sun was just setting in a blue and flawless

sky. The fine blooms of the rhododendrons in front of the Palace, the glimpses of smooth and shimmering water in St. James's Park, the fair trees that cast long shadows, the exquisite green grass, the wide beauty of the Mall, gave him a painful pleasure. When they were behind him, he allowed his mind to busy itself with similes that were still more painful. He told himself that he was like the conscientious driver of a train who had brought his load of perishable freight on a far and difficult journey, only to see the rails in front of him disappear into the sand of a limitless desert. He thought he was like a bird that had built its nest in a rainwater pipe during a brief and temporary drought. He thought he was like a man who had sunk his entire fortune in an oil well only to find salt water.

When he reached the Café Royal, he selected a table in a corner and sat down on one of the plush-covered seats against the wall. When he was in the Café Royal he always felt that he was on the Continent. At the Café Royal a man could sit with his hat on. A man could write letters and buy nothing more, if he wished, than a glass of soda-water and a stamp. Or he could order a six-course dinner, and find it excellent. He could bring his wife and children and his aunts and cousins, or he could come alone and sit gloomily. No one would remark him, either way.

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When the waiter came he ordered a salmon-trout, a tournedos to follow, with peas and new potatoes, and a large whisky-and-soda. And then his spirits failed him utterly, and he ate half the salmon-trout, waved away the tournedos when it was brought to him, and ordered another whisky-and-soda. Presently, to keep his thoughts from himself and from his unhappy case, he began to observe, with an interest that was somewhat forced, the people about him. Opposite him were two women and a man. One of the women was vivacious, full of vitality, moderately good-looking, and supplied with comfortable and adequate curves. It was clear to Charles that if the man had been purchasable for the sum of twopence, she wouldn't have bought him, but she spared no pains to amuse him and to amuse herself. She lived for the moment; she would always have energy enough for the moment; she was the sort of woman who would never fail to attract males. The other woman, who had more heart, little vitality, and less charm, was clearly loving and unloved. She watched with a bitterness perfectly apparent to Charles the success of her companion. She tried to attract the man's attention; she interrupted their talk and tried to divert it to herself; she put her hand, now and again, on his arm. He responded briefly and turned back to the other woman again. Her forced smiles died

abruptly, and her expression then was anxious and bitter.

But tragic though she was, he hardened his heart against her. Hers was a silly tragedy. She was an unsuccessful and peevish pursuer of worthless men.

"Give it up," Charles said to himself. "Pursuit of men . . . that's what brings the crows' feet. You'll be old and weary before your time. Give it up."

And then it struck him that he himself was very like that woman. He, too, was solicitous, pursuant, and rebuffed. The man was fate. Jove-like, he condescended, now and again, to be pleased. The other woman, buxom, careless, vital, heedless, was life. Was not he, like that tragic third, constantly putting out a solicitous and anxious hand?

"Look my way now. I am as deserving of happiness as anyone. That other woman is a scheming and worthless cat. Pay no attention to her."

He had been saying wheedlingly to fate: "You might just let me keep my daughters. They're really all I care about. Well, anyhow, five years more or ten years more. I don't come bothering you for favours very often. I am not an exigent fellow. You won't find me at all troublesome."

Ludicrous, this pursuit of happiness. No one knew it better than he. How often had he not



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dinned it into the minds of Caroline and Venetia?

"Don't ask me what we're here for, because I don't know. But what I do know is that in a chancy world like this, full of motor-buses that may mow you down when you least expect it, happiness isn't and can't be the object."

One thing, however, he did know. He knew what he was here in the Café Royal for. It was because his life had suddenly become entirely purposeless; and because he realised he would have to live it alone.

"Waiter, another -large whisky-and-soda, please."

By ten o'clock he had had five.

His mind was extraordinarily clear by that time. He saw life in its entirety. He saw it as plainly as he saw the gilded and ornamented ceiling, the marble-topped tables, the pendant chandeliers with their three electric lights apiece, the herd-faces of the people about him.

There were two views to be taken of this business called life. The romantic-symbolic-mystic view, or the scientific view. He took the scientific view. He had always done so. It was the only view for a man of intelligence. Nine-tenths of the observations made about life were ignorant and romantic nonsense. Life was one of two things. It was either an ingenious invention for causing pain, or it was an interesting scientific

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phenomenon. The moment it ceased to be the second, it became the first. If you were wise, you diminished yourself out of existence with the comforting aid of science—an invention for putting man in his place. The romantic mind saw man as a Noble Creature born to subjugate the Lower Animals, and to take the chair at Directors' Meetings. The scientific mind regarded him as it regards something in a drop of sea-water. The moment you succeeded in looking upon yourself as something in a drop of sea-water, the fact that your two only daughters were about to leave you desolate became immaterial.

"Waiter, another large whisky-and-soda, please."

And then there were the stars. Good God! The stars, ether, atoms, protons and electrons. . . . The stars, from a God's-eye point of view, were very likely atoms. The atoms that composed our bodies, from the point of view of science, might be stars. Magnify them sufficiently, and they might be found to be worlds inhabited by beings like ourselves. Why not? A tedious conception, but quite possibly a true one. And then where was man, with his little pains?

He drank his whisky-and-soda, and knew that he comprehended the universe. To comprehend the universe and then empty one's mind of it was

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the act of a god. He was capable of that too. He took it in his stride.

The only thing he couldn't seem to do was to get drunk. Everything else was ridiculously simple. Although he was now about to embark on his sixth? seventh? eighth? large whisky-and-soda, he could solve, if confronted with it, the most difficult problem in accountancy ever accounted. Or encountered. Numbers were playthings, delightful little playthings, as amenable and friendly as tame mice. They had the same bright alertness as tame mice. Mice and numbers. There was a kinship between them he had never noticed before. They had the same furtive and mischievous way of nibbling at one's cheque-book.

The pity of it was that a man as able as he couldn't get drunk when he wanted to. It was partly due, no doubt, to lack of practice. In fact, now that he came to think of it, he had never been really drunk in his life. That was the worst of not having had a University education.

"Waiter, another large whisky-and-soda, please."

"Sorry, sir, it's after hours."

"Ah," said Charles.

He realised that he was defeated. He had set out with the deliberate intention of getting drunk, and he was, instead, most exquisitely and

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significantly sober. He sat there in his corner, as lonely as a coral island, and waited for his sorrows, which had been damned back for a time, to rush upon him in a torrent, in a black spate, and overwhelm him.

But a curious thing happened. That cunning and noiseless servant, his subconsciousness, which had been busy searching for something its master could clutch at and cling to, now skilfully produced for him at this most crucial moment a vision of Lydia.

Smiling, *soignée*, charming, she now moved before his inward eye; she spoke, laughed, came and went, was lost, was recaptured again. He saw her entire, then certain of her more noticeable and best-remembered features. He saw her fair hair as it fell away in waves from its parting, her neat silken ankles, her little arched eyebrows and thick eyelids; he got, now and again, a quick and inquiring glance from her grey eyes. From a position somewhere in the background she now moved forward, grew larger, and occupied for the first time a place, if not in the forefront, at least in the middle distance of that dreary waste or emptiness he had been contemplating.

And very nice she looked there, he thought, very calming and comforting. He felt soothed and reassured. There she was. There she had been all along. There she would continue to be.

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He felt as a child feels when someone has dispersed the horrid dark by bringing in a nightlight.

He presently got up and walked to the door sedately and without haste. He asked the commissionaire, very formally, if he would be so kind as to get him a taxi. When it came he thanked him, tipped him generously, and gave the address to the driver with a certain pomposity agreeable to himself.

His head, he told himself, was bloody but unbowed.

The drive home seemed to take no more than a minute, but, short as it was, it struck Charles as being a drive of some significance, although just what that significance was he would have found it difficult to say. That return to Eaton Gardens marked, he felt certain, some turning-point in his life, no matter what. When the cab stopped in front of his house, he looked up at it and said to himself: "So this is home!" and felt that he had made a *bon mot*. But there was more to come. He couldn't send the taxi driver away without some recognition. He was a good fellow, and had conducted him there in safety. He gave him five shillings, which was more than double the correct fare. Generous, but just, he thought. But there was still something lacking, something in the nature of a fine gesture. With

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a flourish of the hand as he turned to enter the house, he said to the driver, who was preparing to depart:

“It would give me much pleasure if you were to call me Charles.”



## *Chapter XI*

VENETIA, unlike Caroline, was superstitious about May as a month for weddings, but there was no help for it. Clive sailed on the thirty-first. They must marry on the thirtieth.

"And after all," she said to Charles, "it's nature's bridal month, obviously; all the trees and hedges are in white. What's good enough for nature is good enough for me."

From the twelfth to the thirtieth Charles saw little enough of her, which was not surprising. She bought clothes, went to fittings with Lydia Chalmers, finished her statue of the boy with the fish, supervised its casting, had herself, after long discussions with both Charles and Clive, who refused to give advice but were willing to state their own views, both baptised and confirmed, and finally, two days before Caroline's wedding, had her hair shingled and permanently waved.

Charles protested loudly against this piece of vandalism as he called it, but Clive said he didn't mind; he only wanted her to be comfortable. She returned from the hairdresser and sought out

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Charles in his room as he was dressing for dinner.

"I'm shingled, father," she said, taking off her hat.

"I see you are," said Charles. "I like it."

"Well!" she cried. "After all the fuss you made . . ."

"Fuss?" Charles said, fastening his collar. "Nonsense. I never made a fuss. You must be thinking of Clive."

Caroline made almost no preparations for her wedding beyond buying a pair of stout boots, a cheap tweed coat and skirt, and two sets of what she called plain but good underwear. She asked Charles to give her, as a wedding present, an imitation ivory toilet set, and from Venetia she requested a suit-case made of brown fibre, which she said was the lightest to carry.

"But you won't be carrying it yourself," protested Venetia. "Why don't you have a leather one? The extra weight doesn't matter."

"If I don't carry it, Phil will have to," she said. Porters were evidently not even considered by them.

They were leaving on the afternoon of the eighteenth for a walking tour of the Lake District. Their "heavy" luggage would go by train and charabanc, and they meant to carry with them only a small light bundle apiece. They were coming back for Venetia's wedding and then return-

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ing to the Lake District again for a further ten days. After that they would move into a small flat in Hampstead over some shops, which "Mother Kate" had found for them.

To Venetia it all seemed rather miserable and depressing.

"A few months ago," she told Charles, "Caroline wouldn't have dreamt of going on a walking tour for her honeymoon. I don't think she's strong enough. Phil and the Robinsons have completely changed her."

Phil, who had gone on foot over the Dolomites and had tramped over half Switzerland, had perfect faith in Caroline's ability as a walker.

"Caroline's a perfectly healthy, normal girl," he said, when Venetia begged him not to do too many miles a day. "You may be sure I'll take the greatest care of her."

Caroline shingled her hair the day before her wedding. She had strongly advised Venetia not to do it, but when Phil saw her sister's head he implored Caroline to follow suit, which she did with some reluctance. It didn't please her to follow Venetia's example in anything, and she wished fervently that she had done it first. But Phil's pleasure was her law, and she came back from a cheap and obscure hairdresser in the King's Road with her fair hair cut very short, like a boy's. She had gone Venetia one better. Phil was de-

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lighted with the result. She made him think more than ever of a Joan of Arc.

To Charles there was a certain pathos about that registry-office wedding in Henrietta Street. Venetia thought it very like obtaining a dog license, or a license for driving a car. The crudeness of it made her wince. Only Mr. and Mrs. Robinson were there, and Charles and herself. Caroline said that if Clive came she would have to ask Phil's sister and her husband, which would make too many. The party returned to Eaton Gardens afterwards for lunch. Phil was nervous and inclined to be fussy, although he smiled continually and made jokes. He had his watch beside his plate during lunch, as they had their train to catch, and reluctantly sipped the champagne which Charles insisted on giving him. He would only let Caroline put the glass to her lips.

"I don't care what his politics are," said Venetia afterwards. "What I do object to is his priggishness. I don't feel a bit happy about Caroline. They're so sententious, all of them."

"Well, it's done now," said Charles.

She pressed his hand.

"Father, you do like Clive, don't you? Really like him, I mean."

"I love him," answered Charles.

It was true. He had grown to love Clive, and would have had him no different. He liked his

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clean-cut mind, his nice humour, his frank and passionate adoration of Venetia, his contempt for the courtier type of soldier, his strong sense of justice, his fearlessness, which Charles admired all the more because he knew him to be complex and sensitive. A very strong friendship sprang up between them, which delighted Venetia almost to the point of tears. Her cup of happiness would have been full but for that voyage to India, and the two or, possibly, three years that would separate them from Charles. And yet she could have done no differently. To have allowed those thousands of miles to come between herself and Clive would have been worse than foolish; it would have been almost criminal. With every hour, with every day that passed they were growing nearer together, they rejoiced in each other more.

"Father," she said one day, "if I ever complained of the way you brought me up, I humbly apologise. Clive says practically everything that's nice about me he can trace to you, and I believe he's right."

Charles was unspeakably touched and moved. This heady praise was almost more than he could bear.

"Caroline will never say that," he remarked.

"Caroline was born with a terribly decided little character of her own, and you haven't been able to influence her much."

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"She's all right," said Charles, loyally.

"Well, five years from now," said Venetia, "she'll either be enormously improved or, from our point of view, absolutely ruined. It will be one or the other. Do try to see as much of her as you can."

"I intend to," said Charles. "Even if it means seeing Phil at the same time. Even if it means seeing Mrs. Robinson. Greater love hath no man than this."

"And father, Lydia Chalmers is such a dear, and very fond of you. Do see something of her. You needn't be afraid she'll misunderstand."

"I'm not afraid of that," he said.

"I'm hoping to hear," Venetia added, "that she's married again before very long."

"To anyone in particular?" Charles asked quickly.

"No. Just to someone nice, who'll appreciate her. There's a man here now, an American, who is in love with her, I'm sure. I've met him."

"What's he like?"

"Very agreeable. Just a little elderly and staid for her, I think. A sort of spinster bachelor."

"She hasn't mentioned him to me."

"No, I don't suppose she has. And you haven't seen much of her lately, have you?"

"I only wanted to see you, my darling, and Caroline."

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"Oh, father, try to like other people more. Mrs. Mallison, and Miss Brewer . . ."

"I'll go and call on them next week."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"I'll write to you by every mail," she said, "and Clive very nearly as often. And Marie has sworn to look after you, and not let you have any household worries."

"I ought to give up this house," he said.

Venetia protested strongly.

"I must go on thinking of you here," she said.

"I think I ought to take a small bachelor flat somewhere."

"Would you rather do that?"

"Good heavens, no. But it seems absurd to live here alone, and extravagant besides."

"Your expenses will be much less when we've gone, and Marie is a good manager. Promise me you won't think of giving up the house."

"I promise," he said again.

Now that Venetia was going to leave him, she understood him better than she had ever done. He knew that Clive had much to do with that, and was grateful to him. It was satisfactory to realise that both his sons-in-law liked him, though his own feelings for them were so different. Even Phil, he thought, might strengthen the bond be-



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tween himself and Caroline. He was sure he had no desire to weaken it.

He often wondered how other men felt toward their daughters. If he had had a wife who would, doubtless, have been half responsible for their upbringing, he would have minded the loss of them less, and, in all probability, he would have loved them less. Their complete dependence on him, his large responsibility toward them had dwarfed everything else in his life. His mind at this time often went back to that boarding-house in Lancaster Gate and his long struggle there with bills, with childish illnesses, and, for the first year or two, with indifferent nurses. He remembered how he had kept aloof from all his fellow lodgers, especially the women, who developed, as a rule, the most fatuous and maddening fondness for the twins, and were always wanting to kiss them and give them unwholesome sweets. He had been rude, ruthless. He had taken on a difficult job, and had carried it through to his own satisfaction. His daughters' criticisms of his education of them did not disturb him very seriously. Youth always saw where its upbringing could have been bettered. That was natural enough. What he longed for was their affection, and that he knew he had to work for. If he ever bored them with parental platitudes, he had only himself to blame. To be as unlike a parent as possible had been his

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chief concern. In Venetia's case he had been amply rewarded. She had always been amused and entertained by him. She had had her little rebellions and antagonisms, but they were short-lived and unimportant. She adored him now, and was profoundly grateful to him for not letting her feel, for an instant, that she was achieving her own happiness at the expense of his.

Venetia wore white at her wedding because she had always pictured herself as being married in white, and she hated to disappoint the child she had so lately been. Clive's father, Colonel Cary, bearing his arthritic joints with a jaunty air, as the day demanded, came to church on crutches, and was discovered to be asleep before the end of the service. He was old and broken, more like Clive's grandfather than his father, but his elder sons' deaths, one in the battle of Jutland, the other at Zeebrugge, had crippled him mentally and physically. Charles, looking at him, wondered how long England would continue to reproduce his type. His life had been dedicated to obedience, given and received. The subtleties and complexities of life did not exist for him. The world consisted of good and evil, fearlessness and cowardice, good fellows and rotters. The good fellows married nice women in their own class, fought bravely, played games, cheated no one, went to church regularly, and scorned

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French cooking. He had a poor opinion of people who worked in the City, but otherwise had nothing against either Charles or Venetia, whose loveliness pleased him. He was a perfect specimen of his type, and Charles, when he asked himself whether its passing was for good or ill, was in doubts as to the answer.

Caroline, unbecomingly sunburned, Phil, his hair bleached and looking wilder than ever, ugly Miss Brewer, old Mrs. Mallison who had given Caroline and Venetia their coming-out ball three years before and was devoted to Charles, Rupert Hinkson and his brother Leopold and Mrs. Leopold, Lydia Chalmers, and Marie the cook were the only guests. There were no bridesmaids, and Clive had decided to dispense with a best man.

Charles, having given Venetia away, retired to his pew and tried to close his eyes and ears to the rest of the ceremony. It was too lacerating. He invited into his mind the most frivolous and unseemly thoughts. By turning his head slightly he could see Lydia, and he presently let his eyes rest on her. She was looking very pretty in a dress of fawn-coloured silk and a smart little hat with a cockade in it.

"Now how much, exactly, do I like her?" he asked himself, averting his face from the two kneeling figures at the altar. He liked her, he decided, much better than any woman he had ever

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known. That wasn't saying very much, perhaps, if he didn't count his three years of feverish love for Brenda. He was fond of Miss Brewer in an entirely sexless way. She had a charming personality, brains and gifts, and the hardihood to laugh at her own extreme ugliness. "The Monster," she called herself. Charles liked and admired her. Mrs. Mallison was an old coquette, a pretty, white-haired woman, who was still full of pleasing vanities. Charles would have seen more of her, but that she always teased him to come to her parties, which did not amuse him at all. Lydia, in a race with these two, led easily. She never teased him in any way. No one was so well balanced, so sane, so aware of other people's points of view. He respected her judgment, he was beginning to fear her charms. How much, he wondered, could he see of her with impunity—and immunity? Not very much. He wondered if he would continue to give small dinner parties, now that he was alone. He considered, first of all, a party of four, consisting of Lydia, Miss Brewer, Rupert Hinkson and himself. Dull, dull! No, without Venetia he preferred to be alone, entirely alone. No makeshifts. He saw himself sliding gently down, by easy stages, into a deep rut. That didn't matter. Nothing mattered very much now. . . .

He, Venetia, Clive, Rupert Hinkson and the

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parson went out into the vestry, while the organ played a voluntary selected by Clive.

It was over.

They all went back to the house for what Charles called "a collation." Marie had made a magnificent wedding cake. She loved Venetia, and her heart was very heavy to think that she would never live there any more. She had never been very fond of Caroline, who had no palate for food. To order food, to cook it, even to eat it intelligently required temperament, and she considered that Caroline had none. Charles had it and Venetia had it. Marie was very critical of Caroline, a little critical of Charles, whose habits she considered unnecessarily regular, but of Venetia she was not critical at all. In marrying such a "beau jeune homme" she had reached the very pinnacle of her esteem and favour. She and King, the elderly butler who often came in to wait at dinners, served the tea, Marie still wearing her out-of-door clothes which she had put on for the wedding. Everyone talked to her. She was outspoken and original, and her talk, like her food, had character.

Caroline had come down early from Hampstead, where she and Phil were staying with his parents, to arrange the flowers, which she did conscientiously and stiffly. She had no feelings of tenderness toward the home she had left. She

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felt that she had spent a profitless and cramped youth there, though in what way it had been cramped she would have found it difficult to say. The only possible life for her was the life she was now going to live with Phil. She thought Venetia's wedding, simple as it was, all flummery, and compared it unfavourably with her own. She thought civil marriages would probably survive time's changes, but she believed the religious marriage was doomed. She also looked forward to the day when it would be exactly as easy to untie the knot as to tie it.

"As it is, it's a trap," she said. "Easy to get into, hard to get out of. It ought to be made easy both ways, or hard both ways."

She liked to imagine that she and Phil were held together by nothing but their own wish. Matrimony, however, she took to as the proverbial duck takes to the green waters of the farmyard pond. She only wished she had met and married Phil at seventeen. She loved their walking honeymoon in the sun and rain of the Lake District, the crude and simple intimacy of their life together. She was often ready to drop with weariness, but when she reached that point the inn they were aiming for was never far away. She thought his skill with maps amazing. Everything he did pleased and satisfied her; nor did the sight of his pince-nez flashing back the rays

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of the sun as it sank behind Helvellyn jar upon her.

She spoke a few words to Lydia, said she hoped she was enjoying herself, and added, "Do see something of father. I feel he may miss Venetia more than he realises."

"Don't you think he realises it now?" asked Lydia.

"Well, he seems in very good spirits at the moment," Caroline answered.

Lydia thought: "You've got to go through a lot, my dear, before you'll be human," but she liked Caroline in spite of that, and was amused by her. Little signs of uxoriousness on Phil's part amused her too. She noticed how he praised Caroline to the others, hovered jealously near her, and compared her in his mind, she was sure, with her less earnest, less useful sister. The moment the champagne was brought in, he was on the defensive—champagne being for him a symbol of luxury and vice—and, as at his own wedding, he again frowned at Caroline as she took up her glass.

"I think I must drink my sister's health," Lydia heard her say, and then Phil's reply in a low, urgent voice:

"Yes, I know, sweetest, but only a sip, please. You know how I hate it."

Charles went out, bareheaded, and saw Venetia



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and Clive into the taxi that was to take them to their hotel. He and Clive stood talking, the younger man's arm about his shoulders.

"Good-bye, Charles, old boy, bless you," Clive said.

"Not good-bye," cried Venetia, "as we're seeing him to-morrow. You'll come in plenty of time to see us off, won't you, father, so that we can talk in peace?"

Charles said there need be no fear of his not getting there in time. He thought Venetia looked pale and tired—small wonder—and he guessed, too, that she was feeling the parting as much, nearly, as he was. He kissed her again, smiled and waved his hand, shut the cab door smartly and turned away. The door of the house and the steps seemed to swim toward him on his own tears.

Venetia, as the cab drove off, flung herself into Clive's arms.

"It's hellish, having to leave him like this," she cried.

"It is," agreed Clive. "But it would have been considerably more hellish if you hadn't."

The guests drifted away. Caroline and Phil left soon after the departure of the bride and groom, as they had a train to catch; Rupert Hinkson went next, after a long talk with Lydia; then Miss Brewer, gaily dressed in bright colours that

## *After Noon*

made her ugliness look picturesque, then Mrs. Mallison, after extracting a promise from Charles to come and dine, then Mr. and Mrs. Leopold Hinkson, who showed a disposition to be sympathetic; until finally only Lydia was left. As she offered her hand in good-bye Charles said:

"Don't go yet. Let's leave all this ghastly débris and go down to my room for a smoke."

The fig tree made a green wall now against the window, and the room made Lydia think of a room under the sea. They sat and talked and smoked cigarettes.

"What are you going to do to-night?" she asked him.

"God knows," said Charles. "Anything but dine here."

He had thought of the Café Royal, but discarded the idea. It would recall too vividly the misery and the futility of that other night.

"Why not dine with me?" she asked, with qualms and uncertainties unguessed by Charles.

"I thought you'd probably have another engagement. You're so busy these days."

She had been dreading that he might say, tersely, that he wanted to be alone. She was encouraged.

"I had, but I can easily put it off. I was only going to dine with someone . . . it wasn't of any importance. I think we'd be better company for

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each other to-night than for anyone else." She added: "I only knew Venetia for a short time, but I shall miss her horribly. There are so few people I really love, and I do love her. So don't imagine you're the only one to be pitied."

"I don't think I'm to be pitied at all," said Charles, and threw back his head. "On the contrary, I'm a damned fortunate fellow. I'm a comparatively young man, I'm to all intents and purposes a bachelor, and I have sufficient money for my needs. I mean to have a hell of a time."

His air of gaiety, which was not even intended to deceive, made him seem to her both lovable and pitiable.

"I might easily get too fond of him," she thought.

"I know," she said aloud, "doesn't it sound enviable? Millions of men would give anything to be in your place."

"I shall do all the things I've never done. Give dinner parties to fragile and fruity young women, gamble, get into the bankruptcy court, have my photograph taken at Deauville in a bathing suit and on the Lido in pyjamas, be cited as co-respondent and end by acting for the films. What have I been all these years but a domestic drudge?"

"Like me," she suggested.

"And the mournful fact is," he went on, "I've

no desire to be anything else. You see in me a family man—except that I distrust and dislike matrimony. What I would really like to do would be to live the last twenty years over again.”

“Oh,” she cried, “if you can say that, you’ve been happy. The only years of my life that I want to live over again are the five years when I had Robert. I’d give the rest of my life for those.”

“You poor dear,” said Charles quickly, and put out a hand towards her. “I talk too much about my own troubles, but you encourage me to do it. Tell me, what are your plans?”

His sympathy caused Lydia to feel a stab of self-pity. No one, seeing her like this, realised her loss. No one could, who hadn’t gone through a similar experience. She suddenly felt sore and unloved and alone.

“I think I shall go to Paris at the end of the week,” she said.

The words were no sooner spoken than she realised she had said them in order to see what effect they would have on him. His expression changed. She saw his hand go to his hair and begin twisting a lock of it. It was a habit with which she was familiar, and she knew it meant, in some degree, mental agitation.

“To Paris? For how long?”

She looked away from him, out of the window.

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The light that filtered in through the thick leaves of the fig tree made her look pale, and gave her fair hair a greenish cast.

"I don't know. I might stay in Paris the whole of July, and then go to Brittany. Or I could visit Grace de Ferrière." In the silence that followed she got up and gave him her hand. "But I'll tell you more of my plans later. You're dining with me at the Berkeley, aren't you?"

"No," said Charles. "You're dining with me." He mentioned a hotel that had a balcony overlooking Hyde Park. "Let's say a quarter past eight. The daylight lasts for ever now."

"Yes," she said, "I love these long days, in London."

"Then why go to Paris?"

"Oh . . . for a lot of reasons." He went to the door with her. "Good-bye, for the moment."

"I'll call for you at ten past," said Charles, and stood looking after her as she walked away.

The sun was hot, and she put up an orange-coloured parasol which screened her both from Charles's eyes and from the eye of the sun. She had lost, for the moment, her usual poise, and as she walked toward Eaton Square there was misery in her heart.

"I shall walk back to the hotel," she thought. "It will do me good." She wanted to examine her feelings and take herself in hand. A tear fell

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suddenly from her cheek to the front of her dress, and then another and another. Angry, ashamed, biting her lip, she wiped them away. "Why am I crying? What is the matter with me?"

The matter was that she wanted Charles to love her, and that she already loved him. She knew it now. That was why she had said she was going to Paris. It had had an effect of a sort, but not the effect she had looked for. It was little consolation to her to feel, as she did feel, that he was fond of her but was fighting his fondness. He would succeed, she was afraid, only too well. As she dried her eyes she told herself that she had no intention of making it harder for him to fight it, but how stupid it was, and how *irritating!* He was wrong, wrong. To condemn marriage because one has been married to a worthless woman, or, at any rate, a very second-rate woman, was absurd. Angry with herself for caring, and for her tears, she presently began to feel rising up in her the spirit of battle.

She had never, in all her life, exerted herself to attract a man. There had been no need for her to exert herself with Edward. She was his wife. Faithfulness, with him, amounted to a vice, and he had never, as the saying is, looked at another woman. Men had loved her too easily, with too little understanding. To know that Charles, who was critical, exacting and perceptive liked

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her, but was fighting his liking, aroused something in her that had long been dormant. It was a sort of challenge.

"I like you, but I will like you only up to a given point and stop there," was what he seemed to say to himself.

"You will like me as much as *I* like," something in her protested.

It wasn't that she wanted to *marry* him . . . but wasn't it? Didn't she?

Walking through Eaton Square toward Buckingham Gate, the trees shaded her from the sun and she put down her parasol. She went slowly, probing into her mind. She had been attracted to him from the first. She admitted that. She had said to herself more than once, "That's the *sort* of man I would like to marry, if I ever marry again." She looked at the houses she passed and tried to picture herself living in any one of them with Charles. She could at any moment take one and live in it alone, but that prospect did not please her. With Charles, yes. She could see not a single disagreeable feature, supposing always that she abolished his prejudices. They enjoyed each other's society, it would put an end to their loneliness, and Charles, whether he knew it or not, needed a wife.

Having dragged these thoughts into the light, she began to consider what she ought to do. What



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troubled her most was her frankness, which she now perceived to have been entirely spurious, that night at the Berkeley. She realised, with disgust, that he had believed her, but that she had not really believed herself.

"I'd better go to Paris," she thought, "and forget about him." The unscrupulous female in her added, "And give him a chance to find out how much he misses you."

Well, she had been over-scrupulous all her life. Why shouldn't she now employ some of the perfectly legitimate artifices by which most women brought about those things they desired? She now knew, definitely, that she wanted to marry Charles. She also knew that she could make him far happier than he would otherwise be. As for living in England, she found, as so many other American women have found, that it suited her. She felt soothed and lulled by London. Her long overstrung nerves relaxed and ceased to torture her. She could even think with less agony and bitterness of Robert's death, now that she was so far removed from the scene of her sorrow.

"He doesn't know," she said to herself, "how happy I could make him. If he doesn't marry me he'll never marry anybody, and he'll deteriorate, as men do who live alone—and women too."

As soon as she reached the Berkeley she went

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up to her room and telephoned to Arthur Templeton, who was, as Venetia had guessed, in love with her, but in a mild and recurrent way. He was a bachelor of fifty-five or so, a sort of social landmark in Buffalo, and even in New York. He came annually to Europe and purchased small bibelots of one sort and another, which he carried back to America with him. He had proposed to Lydia while she was still very young, before she met Edward, and again after his death, but she had never been able to take him seriously, nor could she do so now. He was fond of titles, antiques and agreeable women, was exceedingly kind and perfectly harmless. People asked his advice about choosing primitives, coffee or husbands with equal confidence. He was a delightful friend if one didn't see too much of him, but one would as soon think, Lydia always maintained, of marrying one's grandfather. He always gave her to understand that she had wrecked his life, but that was a compliment, she suspected, that he paid to others besides herself.

"That's so like you, Lydia, you heartless creature," he protested when she rang him up. "You ruin my whole life with the utmost sang-froid, and you're overwhelmed with pity for a man who's just got his daughter safely off his hands. You've no sense of values. I suppose I shall have to let you off. I've bought some enchanting Chinese

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pots, for a perfectly hideous price. When will you come to see them?"

Arthur Templeton and his Chinoiseries. . . ! She found Charles and his misery infinitely more attractive. She dressed for dinner with a consciousness of entering upon a new phase of her life. She had fallen in love, she admitted it, and the knowledge excited and thrilled her. It was years, years, since she had felt anything like it.

"I'm in it at last," she thought, "up to the neck. It will probably be painful, but I don't regret it. It will be infinitely better than feeling nothing at all."

## *Chapter XII*

THEY dined pleasantly and quietly on the balcony. They talked about Venetia and Clive, and said what fortunate young people they were to love each other so passionately and understandingly, and to have come together early in life, without impediment or hindrance, and taste to the full those joys that might or might not last, but which, once had, nothing could take away from them.

"I envy them," said Lydia. "My marriage was arranged and overlooked and meddled with from the very beginning. Oh, it was my own fault, I know. I needn't have married when I did. I was young and weak and yielding."

"Were you?" asked Charles. "So was I weak and yielding and young. But I suppose I was happy in a way, if one can be happy when one is drugged, or feverish. When I look back on those years of matrimony, I feel as though I had had a temperature of 104.8 all the time."

"Venetia and Clive are sane enough," Lydia remarked.

"Passionately in love, but quite sane," agreed Charles. "An exquisite and enviable state."

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"Would you call Caroline and Phil sane?" she asked.

"No, they're too earnest. They'll never make each other laugh, or laugh at one another, and there's no sanity like laughter. Still, from their point of view I dare say it will be a success. That is, twenty or thirty years from now will see them still together and still more earnest."

"With a row of earnest progeny," added Lydia.

"All wearing pince-nez," said Charles. "Poor Caroline. But she's very happy."

"Happier than we are."

"Well," said Charles, "I shall go through a very bad time for about a year. After that I expect I shall be reconciled to my lot."

"Which is probably the worst thing that could happen to you," she retorted.

"At any rate, I shan't marry, which is what everyone will urge me to do." He added, humorously, "I am an unfortunate fellow. All my wives leave me."

She saw that it would be best to pursue that subject no further, so changed it quickly. They sat there talking till after ten, then Lydia asked to be taken home, feeling that from her point of view the evening had been agreeable, but sterile.

Charles, on the other hand, had enjoyed it enormously and was grateful to her for coming.

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In the cab on the way back to her hotel he said to her impulsively and sincerely:

"What a nice woman you are! No one bears with me so patiently."

He leaned nearer to her as he said it, and their shoulders touched. Some little current of feeling ran through them both. Before he realised what he was doing he had passed an arm behind her in a sudden surge of liking and affection, and she, responding, swayed toward him. She was slender, fragrant, lovely. He held her in his arms, leaned his face to hers, kissed her smooth cheek, murmured "Lydia," touched her lips gently and experimentally, and then, on fire, off his guard, he kissed her again and again, lost his head completely—how long was it, how long, since he had kissed a woman like this?—held her, pressed her to him with wild violence, inexpressibly moved and carried away, and then as suddenly released her.

They were approaching the Berkeley, slowing down. Both of them were out of breath, bewildered, astounded. Lydia's heart was pounding. "He does love me. I knew it, I knew it," she was saying to herself. He was staring at her in the light from the street lamps, saying nothing, his eyes wide and troubled. They looked at each other in silence, their hands interlocked. He gripped one of hers painfully, raised it to his lips,

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dropped it and got out of the cab. He walked close beside her into the hotel.

"Lydia," he said in a low voice, as they stood in the hall. "Lydia, what have I done? Will you hate me to-morrow? May I ring you up in the morning, early? Before I go to see Venetia off? I must ring you up."

She had drawn her black evening wrap about her and looked tall and aloof, or she seemed so to him.

Far less calm than she looked, she said:

"It's all right. Yes, ring me up. Any time. Good-night." She turned quickly away, leaving Charles looking after her. He went out through the revolving doors again and got into the cab.

"To the Café Royal," he said. He couldn't go home yet. This wanted thinking out.

He found an empty table, ordered a whisky-and-soda, and tried to explain his own behaviour to himself. He had never intended to make love to her. She was damnably attractive, he was fond of her, and he was upset and overwrought by the loss of Venetia, and by the wedding. Lydia had offered immediate solace and forgetfulness, and to kiss her had been a lovely, an exquisite experience. The cab, he told himself, had gone too quickly, they had arrived too soon. There had been no anger in her face, only



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surprise. No, she was certainly not angry. She wasn't a child. She was a woman of the world, and he could rely on her to understand. What a darling she was. Heavenly, those kisses were, heavenly! He re-lived them. And then it suddenly struck him that she had returned them, kiss for kiss.

He started up as though the recollection stung him, paid the waiter, and walked toward home, crossing Regent Street, where the frames of new buildings stood black against the night sky, and went down Piccadilly as far as St. James's Street, and then through the Mall. It was a fine, clear evening, scarcely dark as yet, and he walked briskly.

Never had he been so carried away, so deliciously transported. And never, since Brenda had left him, had he been in such danger. What was he to do now? How was he going to make amends? He felt sure that with her unfailing and gracious tact she would make him feel that no amends need be made. She wouldn't begrudge him the comfort and the forgetfulness of those few delicious moments. They had saved him, probably, from wanting to blow his brains out.

She would understand all that. He needn't worry unduly. He was less perturbed, he told himself, about the kisses he had kissed than about the kisses she had kissed. Yes, she had kissed

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him, darling Lydia. Well, well. It mustn't, he supposed, happen again.

He got into bed, pleasantly tired after his walk, and, fearful that he wouldn't sleep, he slept.

He rang Lydia up at nine o'clock, before leaving the house to meet Venetia and Clive.

"Hello, is that you, Lydia? How are you this morning?"

"Very well, thank you," she said. "How are you? I hope you slept well."

"Much better than I expected to, thanks to our very delightful evening. I'm just off now to meet the children."

"Give them my good-byes and love. I sent them some books, to the steamer."

"What an angel you are!"

"And tell Venetia to write to me. She must write to me."

"She will, of course. I know she will."

A little pause followed.

"This isn't the moment to discuss what happened last night," Charles said, "but I just want to say I hope you don't like me less. I'm afraid I behaved badly, and you were perfectly adorable."

"Not at all," she said with sudden coldness. "There was no need to speak of it." Another pause. "I expect to go to Paris to-morrow, to stay with Grace de Ferrière."

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"To Paris? How long will you stay? I don't like this. When did you make up your mind to go?"

"I don't know how long I shall stay. Several months probably." His last question remained unanswered.

"Lydia! I shall miss you horribly. Must you go?"

"There's no must about it. I want to go."

"Well, please don't stay too long, and do write to me from time to time. I must know how and where you are. This is all very distressing."

"I'll write. Don't forget to give Venetia my messages. Good-bye."

"Lydia, wait a minute. Oh, well, good-bye. Hell!" Charles said as he hung up the receiver. She was different and distant. He had hurt her in some way. He'd write her a long letter and explain everything. No, it was impossible to explain these things on paper. He put on his hat. He was losing everything and everybody, and the worst of his ordeals was still before him. Saying good-bye to Venetia was going to be the most intolerable anguish. He wouldn't see her, after to-day, for years and years. Years and years.

"Yes, I will, damn it all! I can go out to India myself, and I will. I won't be cut off from her like this. It's only a few weeks. There are

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plenty of steamers. India! It's nothing. It's just a bit of England, like Cornwall. A month on a ship. A little pleasure jaunt. If it were anybody else in the world but Clive, I'd snatch her back now. I wouldn't let her go. . . ."

But he couldn't deny to himself that Lydia's departure for Paris wasn't, on the whole, distinctly for the best. He would undoubtedly miss her, but her loss would be swallowed up in the greater loss of Venetia. When one is drowning, a shower of rain makes very little difference.

## *Chapter XIII*

**C**HARLES heard the bell ring a second time, and the knock repeated. Where was that wretched woman? What was she there for but to answer the bell? He heard no footsteps on the stairs, no movement anywhere, and dropping his pen with a word expressive of his annoyance, he went to the door himself, leaving a half-written letter on the table. He had been writing to Venetia one of those cheerful letters it so delighted and comforted her to receive.

DARLING VENETIA,

The last mail brought me no letters from you at all, but the next will probably bring me two lots, so I'm not going to grumble yet. You've been wonderful correspondents, both of you, especially as you've been on the move so much of the time. You'll have come down from the hills by now I expect. Tell Clive I adored his descriptions of some of the officers' wives at Naini Tal, and his sketches were even better. I hope he will send me more from Lucknow. He has a witty pencil.

Comments on your letters are not what you want from me, I know, so I'll detail my own activities to you, as you so gratifyingly insist on hearing them.

Life has been quite agreeable on the whole. Poor

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Marie is much better, but won't be out of the hospital for a week or more. When she is, I'm going to pack her off to Normandy. It's years since she's seen any of her friends or relations, and I feel sure she'll convalesce more quickly there. I shall miss her, of course; I do now; but the daily servant Caroline found for me is a very nice woman indeed, and takes very good care of me. Queer, isn't it, that men rarely have trouble with servants?

You will be pleased to hear that I am now going out in society. I accept invitations for dinner right and left. As for week-ends, I would find myself booked up far in advance if I didn't take care. I don't mind going away now and again, but I don't want to make a habit of it. I shan't bother to tell you who all these people are. They're friends of Mrs. Mallison's, chiefly, and of no great importance in my life. Rupert has been trying to persuade me to join his Club, and I dare say I shall. I haven't definitely decided yet.

I see Antoinette Brewer from time to time. She is at present painting the portrait of an ex-king, which ought to bring her some *réclame*. She is a nice creature. I often go to her studio, and we talk. I can talk to her as I could talk to a man.

Autumn is on us, with the usual rain and fog. Autumn depresses me disagreeably, spring agreeably. Winter and summer I like best. Transitions are rarely pleasing. Look at the world at present. But I would rather not talk about this disquieting planet. Hate will be the ruin of this civilisation of ours, let Caroline praise hate as much as she pleases. She and Phil are like the two branches of one tree. The same wind sways them both; they derive nourishment from the same roots. Caroline now wears the strangest clothes. She buys the materials

## *After Noon*

at the Caledonian Market, I understand, and makes them up herself. They look it. She is less pretty than she was, but that is because she takes less care. In other ways I think she has improved. I would say she was more tolerant. She tells me that she and Phil have not had one second's disagreement in the four months they've been married. As she seemed to feel this was somehow due to the hue of their politics, I at once retorted, "Neither have Venetia and Clive," though you may have come to blows for all I know. No one has ever been so pleased with matrimony, and no one has ever said more hard things about it than those two. They now act as though they had discovered marriage, or as though they had been born married. To me there is nothing more depressing than an unhappy marriage unless it is a happy one. (Always excepting yours.) The smug satisfaction of two people with one another is a very trying spectacle.

I heard from Lydia not very long ago. She seems to be enjoying Paris—revelling in the gaieties of the French capital, as people said forty years ago. Paris is a woman's city. I told her she would like it better than London when she left, though I can't help hoping I was wrong. She hasn't said she likes it better in so many words, but she's evidently planning to stay there. She writes seldom, and her letters are prim, and unlike herself; or, at any rate, her letters to me are prim. But I think I offended her in some way. You, perhaps, are more fortunate.

A few days ago I went to see——

His hair still untidy—he had been toying with that lock—he opened the front door.

He was amazed to see Lydia's back vanishing into a taxi. He would have known that grace-



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ful and elegant back among a thousand. She had paused to shut up an umbrella, as it was raining, and had been impeded by the large, paper-wrapped bunch of flowers she was carrying. Charles dashed down the steps, crying:

"Lydia! Lydia!"

She turned a glad face toward him.

"Charles! Just in time. I thought there couldn't be anyone home. I was just going away."

She got out of the taxi again.

"How long had you been ringing that bell?"

"Oh, ages it seemed. And I'd been knocking, too."

"I only heard it twice. Go in. I'll pay for the taxi."

She demurred, fumbling in her purse, the umbrella and the flowers in her arms.

"Go in, out of the rain," he ordered, and she went. He paid the driver, followed her into the house and closed the door.

"In your library, I suppose," she inquired, placing her wet umbrella in the stand, and preceding him.

"Yes. It's the only room where there's a fire. When did you get back?"

"Only yesterday—last night. How is Marie? I was so sorry to hear about her operation."

Charles said she was better, and that she was

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coming back to him eventually, but not for some time.

"And how are you managing meanwhile? Who's looking after you now?"

"A middle-aged slattern. You'll see her presently. I don't know where she is. Dressing, probably. What have you got there?"

"Flowers," said Lydia, uncovering a bunch of deep red hot-house roses. "For you. It's your birthday, as I happened to know."

She spoke with some diffidence, avoiding his eyes.

"My forty-third. How did you know? I never told you."

"No," she said, "but Venetia did. She mentioned it in her last letter."

Charles said, lifting up the roses and smelling them:

"Well, she's forgotten it since. I haven't heard a word from her, nor from Caroline either, who's no further off than Hampstead. How lovely they are! How nice you are!" He seized her hand and kissed it. "They're the first flowers I've had in the house since Venetia went. Dear, kind Lydia. How adorable of you!"

"I'll put them in water presently," she said. She spoke as casually as she could. Both, remembering their last meeting, were aware of a tension trying to the nerves.

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"Yes, presently. After tea." He went to the bell and rang it. "I left the office much earlier than usual to-day. I must have felt that you were coming, though as a matter of fact I believed you were still in your beloved Paris."

"I came back," she said, "because I loved London more."

"Honestly?"

"Honestly."

He looked at her critically and appraisingly.

"How do you look? Very well, I think, and as ravishing as ever. I suppose you've been spending a fortune on clothes, after the manner of your countrywomen."

She was wearing at the moment the same brown coat and skirt he had often seen her wear in the spring, and she reminded him of the fact.

"Well, it's the way you wear them. I don't pretend to understand clothes. One can't notice everything, and I notice other things. Lydia, I'm delighted to see you. I didn't realise, fortunately, how much I've missed you."

"Have you, really? I'm delighted to be back. I feel young and innocent here, and old and sophisticated on the other side of the Channel. Have you been very lonely?"

"Appallingly. But," he hastened to add, "not really unhappy. There's a kind of pleasure in loneliness, to an epicure. I've tried going out,

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but it doesn't amuse me. People don't amuse me enough, nor the things they say and do. They're too much like myself."

She considered this.

"I don't think I like meeting people, qua people, either," she said. "But I like watching them; and the people I do like interest me enormously. I've been watching a Franco-American marriage lately—my friend Grace de Ferrière, and her husband, Paul."

"What was so interesting about them?" Charles asked perversely. "I should imagine their marriage was precisely like any other—a battle in which neither contestant can hope to win a victory."

"There was no question of a battle there," she said. "They're very happy. But their ways interested and amused me; their ways to one another."

"Well, you have very morbid tastes," Charles said. "It's a spectacle that invariably fills me with pity and gloom."

"It's become a habit with you," she remarked, "to say these things."

"Heaven forbid that I should form habits. I don't like habits. I want to talk about you, now. What are you going to do? Venetia said she thought you were thinking of marrying someone—an American. Is that true?"

His directness made her laugh.

"No, Charles. Venetia met him, and she wants me to marry, so I imagine the wish was father to the thought. It was Arthur Templeton, an old friend—an old beau of mine, as we say. He asks me to marry him every now and then, but I should never dream of disconcerting him by accepting. It would completely upset his life."

"It does," said Charles, then added hastily, "but I mustn't say these things. Are you still at the Berkeley?"

She said she was, but that she was tired of hotels and thought of taking a small house or flat for a few months.

"A flat's the thing," Charles said. "I'll help you find one." He got up and rang the bell again. "Where the devil has that woman got to? She can't be out. It's not her day to be out, and she can't be dressing all this time."

"She might have run out to buy something," suggested Lydia. "Don't let's bother about tea."

"We'll have tea," said Charles, "if I have to get it myself." He went out of the room and, opening the door that led down to the basement, called, "Mrs. Transome! Mrs. Transome!"

There was no reply, neither was there any other sound. Lydia heard him go rapidly down the stairs. She picked up the roses and looked about for something to put them in, but as there

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was nothing in the room she went upstairs to the drawing-room, wondering as she went how Charles could bear to live alone in that deserted house, once bright with flowers and movement and girls' voices. The drawing-room was very cold and damp, so that she saw her own breath and felt chilled. She found an old-fashioned flower vase, with a stem, like an enormous ale-glass, and carried it downstairs. Charles was still in the basement, so she followed him there with the intention of filling the vase at the pantry sink. She had often been in the kitchen in Marie's time, and knew her way about. Not seeing Charles or hearing him, she called out, "Charles! Where are you?"

He suddenly emerged from a door at the back that she remembered as the door to Marie's bedroom.

"Look here," he said, beckoning.

She went to him and looked over his shoulder into the room.

A woman with a very red face lay sprawled on the bed. She was breathing loudly and regularly. Beside the bed, on a small table, lay an empty port bottle, on its side. A glass which had evidently fallen out of her hand lay unbroken on the floor.

"It's my 1876," Charles said in a low voice, and closed the door upon the spectacle.

"What are you going to do with her?" Lydia asked, as they looked at one another.

"Let her sleep it off and send her home as soon as she wakes up. She's only a daily. Poor creature," he added. Lydia saw that he was genuinely sorry for Mrs. Transome.

"Where did you get her? From an agency?"

"No. She's a friend of Caroline's. Anyhow, she got her for me, and vouched for her."

"How did she get the port?" Lydia asked as they returned to the kitchen. "You surely didn't leave it unlocked, did you?"

"The keys were in the wine-cellar door. I never bothered about the keys when Marie was here."

"Marie was different. She was one of the family."

He went to the door and glanced in.

"Well, it's no good counting the bottles now. If she's drunk my best port, she's drunk it. I'll have a look to-morrow." He locked the door and put the keys in his pocket. "Now we'll get tea. Or shall we go out somewhere?"

Lydia said she thought it would be unwise to leave the house while Mrs. Transome was in that state, and he agreed that it would, so they busied themselves getting the tea. Charles put water on the gas stove, and while it was heating cut bread



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and butter not unskilfully. Lydia searched vainly for a cake.

"There isn't one," she finally announced. "And I personally don't care. I don't want any."

"I don't want any either," said Charles, "but I know there was a large Dundee cake in the house yesterday." He added in explanation and extenuation, "She has five children at home."

"Well, you oughtn't to live this way," Lydia said. "It's all wrong. I'll find someone for you. A nice elderly woman who'll live here and take Marie's place till she comes back. I'll see to it at once."

"If you'll find her for me, I'll find you a flat," said Charles. He carried the tray upstairs, and Lydia followed with the brimming vase. She arranged the roses in it, set it on the table, and poured out the tea. Charles poked the fire into a flame and came and sat down close to her at the table.

"How domestic," he said.

"Very," she agreed. "But don't let it disturb you. I shall be gone in fifteen minutes."

Charles ignored this.

"Do you think it was an instinct for good wine that made her choose my 1876, or was it the first bottle she put her hand on?"

"I think she simply groped for something in

the dark. Could she possibly have drunk that whole bottle this afternoon?"

Charles said that he thought it must have afforded her more than one afternoon's relaxation.

"I think," he said with a laugh, "that there's something eternally comic about a drunken cook. Well, I shall have to dine out to-night, that's plain. Will you dine with me?"

Lydia, after a second's hesitation, said:

"Yes, I will. I'd like to."

She handed him a cup of tea and he took it, wishing as he did so that her presence did not recall so vividly her kisses, the delicate odours of her hair and cheeks, and the faint, light perfume of the powder she used.

"Good," he said. "If Marie had been home we could have dined here. Or wouldn't you have come with Venetia and Caroline away?"

She said, looking at him with amused eyes:

"Oh, yes, I think I would. Why not?"

"I never know how women feel about these things. They seem to think it's correct to dine alone in a man's house, but incorrect to dine in his flat. I think it was Venetia who once made this distinction. For all I knew you might consider them both out of the question."

"It's absurd to make rules," she said. "I never do. It depends entirely on the circumstances."

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"Perfectly true. How sensible women are nowadays. Well, where shall we dine to-night?"

They decided on the Café de Paris, where there was a cabaret performance.

"As it's my birthday," said Charles, "I wish to carouse and be gay." And then some impulse made him say, with amazing indiscretion:

"I warn you, I shall probably want to kiss you again."

She felt herself colouring. The sudden activity of her heart annoyed her. She was no young girl to be agitated by such words. And it flashed through her mind that had she been a young girl she could have dealt with them far more lightly.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," she said. "You'll only run the risk of spoiling things."

"I've kissed very few women," Charles said, "but I believe they invariably ask you not to spoil things."

"I'm sorry if I've said anything trite," she answered, "but you force me to. Besides, I think it's true."

Charles put down his cup.

"Women are very like ostriches. Only they don't put their heads in the sand because they don't want to be seen, but because they don't want to see. You know that in spite of all my principles and prejudices I'm in love with you, but you don't want to see it. You ignore it. You

pretend it isn't so. I dare say you're right to do so."

"Even supposing it is so," said Lydia, "knowing you as I do, I can only assume that you regret it, and that you would rather we remained on terms of friendship merely."

"I see I shall have to talk to you about this," he said. "I shall have to tell you some things about myself. It's a confession few men make, but that more would make if they were honest. Women like you, Lydia, nice women, charming women, imagine that men enjoy their society—enjoy, that is, just being with them and hearing them talk, and swapping complexes, as one might say. No doubt there are men like that, but there is also a vast class like myself, who would far rather talk to a man than to a woman, and who would far rather kiss a woman than talk to a man. Lydia, dear, you're one in a million, and I consider you highly intelligent, but there's nothing you can say to me that can really interest me apart from the fact that it's you who say it. If I like a woman very much indeed, I want to more than like her. I want to love her. If I don't like her as much as that, I don't particularly want to be with her at all. I'd rather be alone. If it's conversation I want, I'd infinitely rather talk to a man, particularly a man who specialises in something—politics, or banking, or publishing,

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or what you like. That's the brutal truth, Lydia. That's why I'm a lonely man. That's why I'm totally unsatisfactory as a friend. I'm not a friend. I don't want women friends. I enjoy solitude. I like it. I enjoy my own thoughts. Women only matter to me at all when they matter very much."

Lydia's mind during this speech had undergone several complete revolutions. She hated what he was saying; she liked it. Such a point of view was incomprehensible to her; she understood it profoundly and admitted its truth. She was hurt by it, and she was deeply gratified.

"And where do I come in?" she asked, controlling her eyes and voice with care.

"What I'm saying I'm saying because you are one of those women—one of those very few women—who matter. I think it would be delicious to love you. I know it is delicious to kiss you. I very naturally want to go on kissing you. I want to talk to you as well, of course, but only after I've kissed you, because then we should have got past all the things that don't matter, and would have ceased, very largely, to posture and pretend. I don't want to talk to you about politics, nor about currency; I want to ask you intimate things about yourself, and tell you intimate things about myself, with some hope of getting at the truth on both sides. At first I

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wanted to see you because Rupert asked me to, and because it was my agreeable duty. Now I want to see you for quite other reasons."

He got up to light a cigarette.

"I wanted to explain all this to you before, but you didn't give me a chance. You dashed off to Paris."

"You apologised for that night," she said. "A stupid—nearly a fatal thing to do."

"You quite misunderstood me. I've no doubt I expressed myself badly and baldly, but I certainly didn't apologise, and don't intend to."

She held out her hand for a cigarette, which, a moment before, she had refused. She was unable at the moment to put her feelings into words.

"So I'm no good to you as a friend," she finally said.

"No," he replied. "And I pay you a compliment when I say I never thought you would be."

"But what are we to do?" she cried, distressed. "Friendship is a game that men and women play together. I believe that all you say is very true, though it's seldom said, but all the same there are plenty of men and women who do play it successfully."

"Tame cats, for the most part," Charles said. "Now I'm not posing to you as a cave-man, or a sort of Sheik. I'm very likely as tame a fellow as you'll meet anywhere, but women, to my mind,

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are either to be loved or left alone. There are, I'll admit, a few exceptions here and there. Miss Brewer, for instance, who's so ugly she's hardly a woman at all, but who has a fine mind—the best sort of masculine mind—and there's old Mrs. Mallison who looks upon me as a son, almost. I like to see them from time to time. But if one likes women as friends, one must be prepared to enjoy their activities—luncheons, teas, dinners, dances, all garnished with small talk. I, frankly, am not prepared to. There is another type of woman, the professional woman, who hasn't time for these things, and with her one can at least talk shop, which I like up to a point."

True as all this was, reasonable and honest as it was, it hurt Lydia inexplicably. She realised that Charles had summed up the eternal struggle between civilised men and women. He had set forth the male point of view, that point of view shied at by most women. It explained the popularity of the "tame cats," whom women never really like, but who help them to preserve their illusions about the relations between the sexes.

"You're making it very difficult for me," she cried. "You force me to say one of two things: either that I want you to make love to me, or that I can dispense with your society altogether."

"I don't want to force you to say anything, Lydia. I only want to tell you my own feelings.



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Candidly, I find you adorable, and I adore you. But I can't go on pretending that I like you as a female friend, because I don't. I have extremely little use for female friends, and I'm no good at amiable pretences."

"Take away my physical attractions," she said bitterly, "and there seems to be nothing left for you."

"You can't take them away," he said, "thank God. They're part of everything you do and say and think."

"It's not true," she said.

"Your voice," he told her, "is one of them."

She cried, exasperated:

"What is all this leading to, Charles? What do you want me to say? If we can't be friends we certainly cannot be lovers."

"I knew that," he told her quietly.

"Well, then," she said reproachfully, "you might better have said nothing. It was unkind."

"I told you," he said, "because I was in a quandary. I am in a quandary now."

She got up and walked to the fireplace.

"If you had thought of my feelings," she told him, "you would have said nothing."

He followed her.

"What are your feelings, Lydia? Tell me?"

He had the odd sensation that nothing he had

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said or done since she had come into the house was voluntary. The things he had said, he had had to say. For four months, for more than four months, he had thought about her, had wondered what he would say to her when they met, and on what terms they would meet, had resolved his feelings in his own mind, and had clarified them. What had happened that night was bound to happen. She was the sort of woman he more than liked, and it was inevitable that he should, sooner or later, give way to the impulse to make love to her. Now that he had done so, he knew that he could never again be with her without wanting to make love to her. It seemed to him best that he should tell her this. They were two reasonable people who could talk and think intelligently about their feelings. He was quite prepared, if she should think it best, to do without her altogether.

It was quite true that he wanted, and needed, the companionship of a woman like Lydia, but he believed that marriage was too high a price to pay for any companionship, however delightful. And lonely though he was, he had certain private consolations. A fundamentally happy nature was one of them; his still unfinished anthology another; Venetia's love, and the prospect of having her near him again in perhaps thirty months; Clive's affection for him; Caroline and Phil, and the

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amusement their ways afforded him; his work and his own thoughts. All these were consolations. And while the great majority of people go through life without examining it to see what it is made of, without that self-consciousness that makes man imagine himself superior to the animals, Charles was acutely self-conscious, and nothing delighted him more than to try to discover, with patience and exactitude, what he thought about life; what things he liked about it, and what things he disliked; what things really mattered to him, and of what stuff his existence was made up. He possessed, and he was happy in possessing, a critical intelligence, which, while it tore to shreds the world of easily accepted beliefs in which the majority of people live and move with a certain amount of comfort, built up for him a finer and more choice dwelling in which he took an artist's delight.

She turned and faced him. His nearness and the intensity of his look affected her deplorably. She felt unarmed and at bay, and already wounded. She had no crisp words ready for him, no quick answer that would hide the truth. Nothing came to her mind but the simple facts. Well, let him have them . . . she didn't care. If he had no use for her friendship, if he couldn't and wouldn't play that pretty game beloved of women, it was the end anyway. She had no intention of

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taking Venetia's father for a lover, even had he wished it. Or any other.

"I think you know what my feelings are, without asking me," she said, and her voice was full of passion. "You know very well that I've been weak enough and foolish enough to fall in love with you."

"Lydia!"

For a long time after, she remembered how his face had changed, and what a look came into it. His eyes widened and flashed a look at her that was either incredible joy or the uttermost amazement. He seized her wrists, pulled her to him, put his arms around her with the same hungry eagerness as before, kissed her with violence, and cried, in a sort of happy despair:

"Lydia, Lydia, I love you too, I love you too! What are we going to do about it, my sweetest, my darling?"

She made a sudden movement as though to escape from his arms, but he held her tighter.

"No, no, stay here. Let me kiss you again. How lovely you are. Do you really love me? How can you love me? Anyone would love you, you adorable woman. Lydia, you kissed me that night. Kiss me again."

She kissed him, then pushed him from her with a cry of: "Charles, oh, Charles!" and they stood staring at one another like children who have

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come upon a mystery. They had forgotten Mrs. Transome in her drunken stupor downstairs. They thought of nothing but each other. Into Charles's face had come a new look, a look of resolve, as though he had put his doubts and his prejudices behind him for ever.

"Lydia, darling, we're going to marry. Will you marry me? You must. You say you love me. Is it really true? Say it again."

He caught her to him once more. He was beside himself; it was as though he had suddenly discovered a new heaven.

"But you hate marriage," she cried. "You don't want to marry," she protested.

"I want to marry you. You're the only woman I could dream of marrying. You're the only woman I could possibly live with."

## *Chapter XIV*

**C**HARLES, who usually slept like a child, was awake most of the night. When he did sleep, his brain never ceased working, and it worked, to his disgust, like the brain of an idiot. So absurd and disturbing were these half-awake fancies that he decided he preferred the sanity of complete wakefulness, and turning on his reading lamp he propped himself up with a book on his knees and began to read. Had the telephone been in his bedroom instead of in the library, he would have rung up Lydia, for he thought it likely that she was undergoing the same treatment at the hands of her nervous system as himself.

He found the plays of Mr. Pirandello poor fare for a mind that had for some hours been darting down strange and unknown by-ways like a dog after a phantom cat, so he laid them aside and wondered how soon he would get a cable from Venetia in answer to his, sent late that afternoon, which had said :

Am marrying Lydia as soon as arrangements can be made. Very happy. Know you will both be pleased.

CHARLES.

## *After Noon*

That the news would both delight and sadden her, he well knew. Caroline—to whom he had written before going to bed—it would merely gratify. She would approve. He would be doing in her eyes the sensible thing. Venetia, on the other hand, he could imagine saying to Clive, “I was just beginning to know father, and now he’ll belong to somebody else more than he does to me.” She would be overjoyed that that person should be Lydia, but at the same time she would not be without fears that their relationship might never again be quite the same. Yes, she would be delighted, and also, for a while, a little sad. They had made in the past, and would make again if the fates were kind, a most congenial four. There were no shadows in that direction worthy of the name. What, then, was making him sleepless? What dread, only half alive, was stirring in his mind? He was determined to drag it out, to inspect it, and have done with it for ever.

It was the fear, he finally decided, that he might disappoint Lydia. She was so certain, so unwilling and unable to see obstacles, so ready to adapt herself to him in every way. And he—it was best that he should admit it—was a solitary, he had always been a solitary. He felt in his bones that there was no path wide enough for two to walk upon abreast, and in comfort. He



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liked to go alone, with critical axe and saw, making his own paths. Could he take Lydia with him on these excursions, or would he have to take to the open highway, where the rest of the world travelled? He loved her, he adored her, he longed for her, and her presence was a delight to him, but would she understand that there were times when it would be a sheer necessity for him to be alone? Few women, he imagined, felt this need. Could he avoid, owing to the peculiarities of his nature, the crime of hurting her?

It seemed to him a tremendous thing that she should be willing to leave her home, her country, her very nationality—women, poor devils, being required to wear their nationality as a snake wears its skin, and shed it in order to make simpler the machinery of law and government—in order to live with him. It seemed to him an exquisite sacrifice. And he was sacrificing nothing but his solitude, and that grudgingly. But wasn't it, his impudent mind inquired, the most precious possession of all?

He cursed his mind and thought of the moment when she had said to him, "You know very well that I've been weak enough and foolish enough to fall in love with you."

That she loved him had never seriously entered his head. She liked him, he believed. When he had challenged her to tell him what her

## *After Noon*

feelings were he had expected her to say, "I like you, Charles. I'm quite fond of you in a way." And he would have said, "Exactly; and my loving you will only, as you yourself say, 'spoil things,' so you see it's best that I shouldn't be seeing much of you. I wish I were different, but there it is." And with that he would, not without poignant regrets, cease to play the part of amiable friend, half-loaves being to him more troublesome and tantalising than no bread at all.

He was now about to take into his life a nervous, critical, and sensitive being, like himself, complex, exacting, asking and ready to give much. It would make his life, which—since Brenda had so wisely left him—had had few complexities in it, a complex problem in itself, to be solved daily. He thought of Venetia and Clive, Caroline and Phil. The young don't hesitate because they don't know. Ignorance and inexperience make the road ahead seem smooth and desirable.

It was because he loved Lydia, because he knew she had a fine and sensitive nature, that he lay awake and tossed and wondered. That she was, like the majority of her countrywomen, extremely adaptable, he knew, and the thought gave him comfort. How far he would prove to be adaptable himself was less certain.

He thought, with pity and tenderness, of her boy, Robert, and the agony of her loss. Her life

## After Noon

had been none too happy, none too satisfactory on the whole. Could he, he wondered, make it happier? But lack of confidence had long been one of his vices. He must try to do away with it.

Three marriages in the Lester family within five months! Incredible! Five months ago he had seen his life continuing as it was, happily and peacefully, for years. Then Caroline, then Venetia, and now himself. All these things had come upon him out of the blue, the last event being the most astounding and unlooked-for of all. Was it *possible* that he was marrying again, and soon?

He started up, fully awake again, out of a moment's half-consciousness. No, it wasn't true. Yes, it was true. It was. It had all happened that afternoon, that and Mrs. Transome's debauch. . . .

He re-lived it all, from the moment when he had realised that no one was answering the bell, which had been ringing for some time, to the moment when he had taken Lydia back to the hotel, after a late and long dinner. She had cried, from sheer happiness and overstrung nerves, going back in the taxi. A lump came into his throat as he thought of it. Hers was a far more ardent and passionate nature than he had at first suspected.

"God bless you, darling Lydia," he said aloud.

## *After Noon*

He switched off the light, turned on his side and fell quietly asleep as the clock downstairs struck four.

Lydia was too tired to lie awake very long. The events and emotions of the day had exhausted her. She had seen her own tears glistening on Charles's cheeks as he said good-night to her in the hall. He had been exquisitely tender, and she felt, as she undressed, that mentally and physically fatiguing as these emotions were, they were nevertheless welcome and delicious. She was excited and intensely happy, and she had no doubts at all as to the future. She knew she could make Charles happy, and that in doing so she would be happy herself. The struggle he had had with his love for her made his final surrender all the more precious. She had known all along that he had wanted to love her, and now that his prejudice against a second marriage was swept away she felt that the road was easy and simple.

She was far less critical and less analytical than Charles. She was the child of a younger civilisation, and when she wished a thing to be, she already saw its accomplishment. That he loved her was sufficient guarantee of the future. She had never experienced anything like the wild hunger of his kisses. Both loved, when they loved, with intensity and passion. Both were able to abstain, fastidiously, from anything less than love.

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She thought of a thousand ways of pleasing him. She understood perfectly his dislike of meaningless social activities. They meant, fortunately, little to her, and she made up her mind never to urge him to take part in them. He would like, she felt sure, the few friends who mattered to her, and his she already liked.

They were going abroad somewhere for their honeymoon, avoiding Italy, and would then return to the house in Eaton Gardens for a while, to see how it suited them. Lydia suspected that it would prove to be too small, but in that case they could easily sell it and buy a larger one. She went over in her mind, as she got ready for bed, the necessary things to be done in connection with her flat in New York and other properties in America, but Charles, she decided, would arrange all that for her. How pleasant to have a second self once more, to have someone again who would put her interests and her welfare above his own. She wasn't, she admitted, an independent woman.

"American women are only independent," Charles had once said to her, "when they have a husband to be independent of."

As far as she was concerned, she thought, brushing her long fair hair before the mirror, there was a certain amount of truth in it. She tidied all the small, bright objects on her dressing-table, threw an embroidered cover over her

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underclothes, which lay neatly folded on a chair, slipped off her blue silk dressing-gown and got between the sheets of her narrow bed. The room was painted in green and silver, like the sitting-room, and on a small table beside her bed, the electric light bringing out the deep crimson of their petals, were some roses like the ones she had taken to Charles that afternoon. She leaned over and kissed one of them, switched off the light, and laid her head on the pillow.

"It's much more exquisite," she thought, using a word of which Charles was fond, "to be in love at thirty-seven than twenty-seven or seventeen."

Venetia's cable, which arrived twenty-four hours later, said:

Thank goodness. Perfectly delighted. Love to both from us both.

Caroline wrote to her father as soon as she got his letter the following morning.

DEAR FATHER [she said],

I'm in bed with a very heavy cold, or I'd come to see you at once. I'm perfectly delighted at your news, and so is Phil. I've felt for some time that it would be far better for you to marry, and that you'd be much happier, and I can't think of anybody more suitable for you than Lydia Chalmers. I hope you'll marry soon, as long engagements are very unsatisfactory and trying.

I think you'll be pleased to hear that I'm expecting a

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baby in February. Phil and I both hope it will be a girl, as we feel that the world has never offered such opportunities to women as now, and it will offer more and more as time goes on. I'm overjoyed, of course, at the idea of becoming a mother, as it's an experience I've longed to have. I don't intend to let it interfere with my work in any way, and at the present moment, except for my cold, I never felt better in my life. Mother Kate and Father Lewis are thrilled, as it will be their first grandchild.

Phil joins me in heartiest congratulations. He's just off to Wales, where he's going to visit some of the coal mines and give talks to the miners. I hope to see you both very soon. Colds, as you know, have a way of getting on my chest if I'm not careful, so I thought I'd stay in bed to-day, though I expect to be at the office again to-morrow.

With much love,

Your affectionate daughter,

CAROLINE LESTER ROBINSON.

P.S.—I do hope I have a baby before Venetia does.

"Not a word," Charles observed to Lydia, "about it's being *my* first grandchild. And it isn't every man who succeeds in getting one at forty-three. I wonder," he said, thoughtfully, "what the record is?"

"But what a child she is, all the same," said Lydia, pointing to the postscript. "And I wonder what she means exactly by my being suitable for you?"

"Well, aren't you?" Charles asked.



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They were married on the seventeenth of October, at the registry office in Henrietta Street. Charles was snapshotted on coming out with Lydia, and in the illustrated papers next day were photographs of them under the headings, "City Man Takes American Bride." "Well-known Chartered Accountant Weds American Widow."

They went for a week to Paris, England having decided to begin the rainy season, and from Paris they went to stay with Lydia's friends, Grace and Paul de Ferrière. Lydia had spent a few weeks there in the summer, and she was anxious that Charles should stay there too, and he was willing to do whatever recommended itself to her. It was in the Province of Loir-et-Cher, a delightful part of France. They arrived there on a cold October evening, alighting from the train at the old town of Beaugency. Lydia, on looking up before getting into the waiting car, saw great bright stars that seemed to lean out of the sky towards her, and they looked so near that she felt she could have reached up and passed a hand behind them. Charles, after seeing their luggage into a bus, joined her, and they left Beaugency and sped at what seemed to them a dangerous pace along the straight, level roads cut through black woods that made a wall on either hand. It was frosty, and as they drove they smelt the rich

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autumnal smell of the leaves and the pungent odour of wood smoke.

St. Cyr was a formal château of red brick, built, Charles guessed, as he glanced up at its front, from a hundred to a hundred and fifty years ago. It was of moderate size, but its long windows, three floors and steep roof made it look very high. The door was opened by a tall, black-haired manservant, and in the hall Grace and Paul de Ferrière were waiting to receive them.

Charles had read several of Grace de Ferrière's letters, and had been amused by her blunt frankness. He had looked forward to meeting her, partly because she was Lydia's friend, and partly because she seemed to him an unusual character. She was a short, dark woman, with brilliant black eyes and short dark hair which seemed to curl naturally. Her face was strong and handsome; she looked somewhat, Charles thought, like a female Beethoven, and he was to discover later that she was steeped in a love of music. He might have guessed her to be French, Austrian, Italian, Russian, or even German; American never, but for her voice and her friendly and natural manner. Paul was tall, fair and blue-eyed, and a Norman. His manner was distant and formal, though entirely amiable. Grace kissed Lydia and then Charles.

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"Lydia's my best friend, and if her husband isn't too, it won't be my fault."

It was half-past nine when they arrived, and they dined at once, without changing, in a high-ceilinged and somewhat empty dining-room lighted only by candles. A silver bowl in the centre of the table was filled with wild red and yellow berries. Louis, the black-haired butler, was an artist, and his arrangement of flowers and greens was a perpetual joy.

Paul spoke excellent English, with an occasional mistake which would be swiftly corrected by his wife—at his request, he explained. She herself spoke almost perfect French, being one of those rare beings—among English-speaking peoples—to whom languages are simple and easy.

She was a great talker, but she talked amusingly and rarely about herself. Another adaptable American, Charles observed. He was later to learn that her grandfather was a naturalised Hungarian and her mother of French descent. Her father had made a great deal of money out of successful operations on the New York Stock Exchange, and Grace, like the daughter of many another rich American, had had an expensive European upbringing. She had met Paul, who was five years younger than herself, in Paris three years ago, when he was thirty and she thirty-five. She had made up her mind that she would never

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marry. She had many interests, absolute freedom, and a morbid horror of fortune-hunters, but she was disarmed by Paul's gentleness, his admiration of all the qualities in her that she thought men must dislike, and by the fact that he cared nothing for society, but loved country life and had enough money himself to procure him most of the things he wanted. As soon as they were married she set to work to find a suitable house in the country, Paul's brother having inherited the family estates, and St. Cyr, in the centre of a hunting district, suited them admirably. At the first opportunity she took riding lessons with as much determination and purpose as she showed in her study of music, and she was now a fairly good horsewoman.

They hunted the stag and the boar, she explained to Charles, and there was a meet the next day to which he and Lydia must come. It was really a charming sight, the like of which could be seen nowhere but in France. She begged Lydia to let her mount her, but Lydia, although she rode a little, had no talent for sports—for which Charles was thankful—and declined. There was little or no jumping, Grace explained—just cantering up and down the long grassy or sandy rides through the forests, with an occasional plunge into the thicket, or across a stream, or a short dash along the open road.

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The house was, if anything, underfurnished. Grace had no use for modern French *décor*, and had bought all her furniture and stuffs in England. Gilt in a country house, except for an old mirror here and there, she thought indecent. Charles had a pleasant impression, when the evening was over, of simple but perfect food, excellent wines, spacious rooms, bare, polished floors, glowing chintzes or dull velvets, crackling fires, and the delicious odour of wood smoke with which he was ever after to associate that part of France.

He and Lydia had a large bedroom with an almost equally large dressing-room adjoining, and one of the six bathrooms Grace had installed when she bought the house. All the windows of these rooms overlooked a lake which was so near that Charles felt he could almost throw out a line and catch a pike or carp. Every now and then in the stillness he could hear the pleasant "plop" of a leaping fish. The lake looked silver grey under the night sky, and the woods surrounding it ebony black. A wood fire was burning in the bedroom, and on Lydia's dressing-table was a bowl of late autumn roses.

Charles felt extraordinarily light-hearted and happy as he sat smoking in an armchair watching Lydia brush her hair. When it was down it gave her a very girlish look, and made her face, with its thick eyelids and fine modelling of cheek and

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brow, look, he thought, like the face of some early Siennese Madonna.

"How do you like them?" she asked, turning towards him.

"Immensely," said Charles, "especially Grace. She's got a lot of character and terrific energy and will. She's the sort of woman who's well worth studying."

"She's a great dear," she said. "I'm glad you like her."

"She's very dynamic and full of feeling. And him," he added, "I should describe as agreeable, superficial, and chiefly interested in hunting. He reads nothing, she everything; to her life's a painful but intensely instructive and perilous adventure; to him it's a matter of creature comforts, avoidance of unpleasantness, and good sport whenever possible. And yet they seem to live happily together. It's astounding. I wonder how long . . ."

"Charles!" she cried. "How outrageous you are! You imagine every marriage that comes under your observation to be on the verge of breaking up."

"I don't think this one is on the verge of breaking up. I think they're very happy, or moderately so. But their dissimilarities amaze me."

"They seem to me," protested Lydia, "two

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charming people who are very fond of one another."

"That," said Charles, "is a mere snapshot of them. They seem to me simply seething with hidden longings and impulses and divergent forces. In other words, they're two very interesting human creatures who are struggling to make their dissimilar natures fit comfortably into one groove. A process of delicate adjustment. And that, my darling, is matrimony."

"At its worst," she said.

"At its best, and all the time. Sometimes that adjustment is pleasant, sometimes it's unpleasant. But it goes on. It must."

Lydia got to her feet with a look of pain.

"You frighten me, sometimes," she said.

Charles sprang up and caught her in his arms.

"My sweetest, my darling, it isn't you and me I'm talking about. It's things in general, marriage in general, or other people. It's never you and me. When I want to talk about you and me, I will talk about you and me, and there'll be no mistake about it."

"I know, I know," she said, and then, as Venetia had once said to him, "but you tear things to shreds so."

"Only because it's fun to see what they're made of," he told her.



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"How long," she cried, her arms around him, "do you give us?"

"I utterly refuse to think of our happiness," he said, "in terms of time, or space either," and kissed her so adoringly and passionately that she presently forgot that the way his mind worked was different from the way her mind worked. Forgot, in his love for her and her love for him, all her little fears.

## *Chapter XV*

**L**YDIA and Charles, breakfasting in bed, surveyed through the long windows a bright October morning. The woods across the lake, so black the night before, now showed themselves to be coloured with russet reds and browns and the dull green of pines. The sky was flawlessly blue, and a gentle and intermittent breeze stirred the surface of the lake. A maid had come into the room earlier and had made up a cracking fire with neat bundles of twigs and small logs of odorous birch.

"I think I would like to live in France," Charles said. "Near here. I'd like to be a charcoal-burner in these woods."

"You'd be one of those charcoal-burners one sometimes reads about in the French papers," retorted Lydia, "who brutally murder their wives, and turn them into charcoal."

"No," Charles told her, "I'd be very fond of my wife, and I'd have seventeen children, the youngest of whom," he added, "would go off to make his way in the world, and would return having ingeniously retrieved the family fortunes

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by the invention of an appliance for painlessly removing the pearls from the necks of opera-goers."

Grace presently knocked on the door and came in. Her dark face and black, curly hair were well set off by the red dressing-gown she wore. She was just out of her bath, and carried a towel over her arm. She was the most natural and unconventional of women.

She inquired how they had slept, looked to see that the fire was burning well, and told them they would have an early lunch, at eleven, and go to the meet. She herself wouldn't hunt to-day, but would take them in the car. Paul was hunting, and would leave the house about ten. It was now nine, so they would have plenty of time to see him before he went. He looked very handsome in his *costume de chasse*. It was the stag hounds to-day. It was a lovely day, and she thought it would amuse them to go. She kissed her hand to them and departed.

"A darling," said Charles. "Worthy of a better man than that handsome but underdeveloped sportsman."

They drove with exhilarating speed along the hard, level roads through endless miles of woods, the colours of which filled Lydia and Charles with intensest delight. They passed occasional small and straggling villages of black and white,

or brick and half-timbered cottages. They saw no new thing anywhere. "Not even a new hen-coop," Lydia remarked. The countryside looked as it must have looked for the last two or three hundred years.

The meet was at a stiff and ugly château in the middle of a formal park, and here they found from twenty-five to thirty cars assembled. Lydia and Charles were introduced to Madame this and Monsieur that, to the Marquis of this and the Comtesse of that. Only a few of the riders were well mounted, the majority of them, Grace explained, not being at all well off. The sight was an enchanting one. The hunt costumes, full-skirted scarlet coats laced with gold, and black tricorne hats also laced with gold, were worn by men and women alike, although some of the women wore modern habits and looked as though they belonged to another epoch. None of them, however, rode astride. Over the shoulders of the huntsmen were great, round, old-fashioned hunting-horns, and a few of the women, Lydia noticed, carried them too. The sight must have differed very little, except for the women in modern habits, from a like gathering in the time of François Premier, whose enthusiasm for hunting had caused the building of Chambord and the cutting of those endless rides through the forests. Paul, thanks to a father-in-law who

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had been fortunate in his operations on the New York Stock Exchange, was the best mounted, and Charles saw Grace's eyes kindle with pride and love as he rode off after the hounds.

They followed, with all the other cars, as well as they were able, making many a wide detour by road, and often seeing and hearing nothing of the hunt. Once a stag, but not the hunted stag, Grace said, crossed the road in front of them.

"Barbarous," Charles protested, "to hunt to death a creature that's so much nicer and so much better-looking than we are."

They succeeded, after much stopping to listen and much questioning of the villagers, in picking up the hunt again an hour later. The hounds had lost the scent, there was much blowing of horns and cantering up and down, and various members of the hunt came and chatted, while they waited, with Grace, who seemed to be very popular. At last one of the hounds lifted up his voice and went off, nose to the ground, across a clearing, whereupon the horns played "La Vue," an old tune that sounded thin and elfin and enchanting coming out of the depths of the woods, and the rest of the pack and the hunt followed after and were lost to sight and hearing again.

"It's delightful, isn't it?" Grace said. "I knew it would interest you. It's all so decorative and formal and charming. Paul is a splendid

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rider and never tires. He'll stick to it all day. Sometimes they don't kill until long after dark, when they kill by torchlight, but I won't keep you out as long as that, I promise you."

"Not long enough to see the kill, at any rate," Lydia said. "Charles would hate it, and so would I."

"It may be bearable," said Charles, "when your blood is up, and you've ridden all day, but to see it from a motor-car would be rather more than I could endure. I should be sick," he added.

Grace said they would go home in time for tea. She always had a big hunt tea, in case some of the riders dropped in. She was the soul of hospitality, and had the enthusiasm of a child. Tea was laid in the dining-room, and differed from other teas in that it included heaped-up plates of thin fried potatoes. Several of the more easily wearied members of the hunt arrived at about half-past five. It was already getting dark, and they had not yet killed, nor did there seem to be an immediate prospect of it. Paul, they reported, said he would stay till the end. Lydia presently stepped out upon a little iron-railed balcony overlooking the lake. The moon was rising, and so, too, was a thin mist from the surface of the lake. Miles away, coming from the direction of the woods across the water, she could hear the thin and delicate winding of the

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horns. As she stood listening, Charles came out and joined her.

"Medieval but exquisite," he said. "How far away we've got from the pushing crowds of Oxford Street!"

"Or from the subway rush hour in New York," she suggested.

"Anachronistic, all this," he said, with a gesture. "Is it a good thing or not? I don't know. We are of this age. I think we ought to live in it. I think it's probably good for us to live in it, unpleasant as it often is. How much should one forget the sweat and the struggle and the misery? I wish I knew."

They visited as sightseers all the more easily-reached of the Châteaux—Chambord, Blois, Amboise, Chaumont—beautifully named, perched high up, for the most part, overlooking the wide Loire, and separated by miles of cultivated and uncultivated country; by ploughed fields, and by woods where the wild boar still roamed, and in which hovered that perpetual odour of wood smoke; where too could be seen the brown and bent figures of the wood-cutters, making up their neat piles and bundles on the forest floor.

Paul remained to the end polite, superficial and aloof, showing enthusiasm only for the pursuit of boar or stag, and none whatever for the ac-

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tivities and interests of the twentieth century. He belonged, Charles said, to the sixteenth. He had a great admiration for Lydia, and no detail of her dress escaped his eye. Grace, who cared nothing for clothes, but usually succeeded in making an excellent effect, always consulted him on these matters, and waited for his praise or disapproval with an almost pathetic eagerness. To Charles, who admired Grace enormously, there was something painful in all this. It was like seeing an eagle, he thought, married to a peacock, and descending lamely to the parterre. If marriage was an affair of delicate adjustments, he thought it only fair that the adjusting should be on both sides, and in the case of the de Ferrières it was only too clearly on Grace's alone. Women, he supposed, performed this feat more easily than men, and he wondered if men, realising this, were not apt to leave the whole of it to them if they could. Take himself and Lydia, for instance. How much of the adjusting was being done by him? He gave a good deal of thought to this while they were with the de Ferrières. Contemplating the bedroom of Catherine de' Medici at Chaumont one day, while Lydia and Grace went on ahead into the room said to have been that of Ruggieri, her astrologer and alchemist, he fell into a sort of trance, or deep study, and stood there, leaning on his stick. For the

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moment he was completely unaware of his surroundings.

He had again embarked, in the most unexpected and unforeseen manner, on that perilous and difficult adventure. His wife was the most charming, the most winning and tactful of women. He had not, since his initial surrender, given up anything, yielded anything. He had changed in no way. Lydia, on the other hand, watchful, sensitive and electric, was quick to anticipate his likes and dislikes, and to adjust herself to his moods. She persuaded Grace to abandon the idea of giving dinner-parties while they were there. Charles was so happy when they were by themselves, she explained, and was apt to retire into himself and say little when strangers were on the scene.

Grace in her straightforward way at once spoke to Charles about this.

"Really," she said, "are you always going to fight shy of every sort of social gathering? What about Lydia?"

"Lydia," Charles had answered, "studies my prejudices too much. I must put a stop to it. It was very naughty of her to say I didn't like meeting people. It's perfectly true, I don't, but I'm always quite willing to go through with it if the rest of you enjoy it, and I promise you, I shan't be bored. I never am bored. Only, if

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you want to know what I like, I admit I like dining by ourselves best."

"Well, as dinner-parties are intended to give pleasure," she said, "I see no point in having them if they fail to do so." She added: "I must say I think Lydia and I are most exceptional wives. Most American women demand that their husbands adopt their ways. Instead of that we set to work to adopt our husbands'. I admit I did, from the first."

"You haven't got American husbands," Charles said.

"You mean we know you wouldn't adopt our ways?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that," he demurred. "But I think Europeans are more individualistic. We conform less to pattern. Our habits and tastes are more diverse and more sharply defined. And when we take a woman into our lives, we expect to go on living those lives much as before; men over thirty do, at any rate. Women take that into consideration when they marry us, or should."

"I hope Lydia did," said Grace. "Remember, she hasn't lived in Europe as much as I have."

As he stood in the room of the misunderstood queen, he said to himself that men who gave way in small things found that their wives gave way in big ones. Excluding, of course, Brenda,

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who had given way to him in nothing. He ought to have insisted on dinner-parties. He suspected that Lydia liked gaieties far more than she admitted. Social functions were devised by women in order that they should be seen by as many people as possible at the moment when they are looking, or think that they are looking, their best. It flitted through his mind that, logically, women should take the most trouble for a single spectator, a husband, or lover; the least trouble for large numbers of people, the eyes of people in a crowd being constantly diverted. But such never had been and never would be the case. Women preferred being seen by a hundred pair of casual eyes rather than by one pair of adoring ones. It was a well-established fact.

There was a bit of wood lying on the stone floor at his feet and he addressed it with his stick and then made a short mashie shot with it. Still, it was all wrong, he decided, that anybody's plans should have been changed on his account. He regretted it. When they got back to London he meant to make an effort. He had married a pretty and charming woman who had a right to be seen. He would join a Night-Club. He would subscribe to one of those theatrical societies that give plays on Sunday nights—the Phœnix, or the Stage Society. He and Lydia would often go to Mrs. Mallison's parties. She knew a vast num-

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ber of agreeable people. To be a bachelor, as he had been, and live a secluded life, was well enough. To be married and live a secluded life was, oddly enough, to be dull. It was also to court disaster. Single dullness was agreeable, married dullness awful. Lydia, bless her, must never be permitted to be bored. He meant to give up a lot of his old, bad habits. He would try, anyhow.

He came to himself and started off in haste to find the other two. Hurrying through the door, he nearly collided with a woman who was entering. He stood aside to let her pass.

She was a big woman, dressed, after the manner of French women who are in mourning, in heavy black, with a long veil. That she was French, Charles had no doubt at all. So barely did he escape collision with her that he said, "Pardon, Madame," and took off his hat. She inclined her head slightly in recognition of his courtesy, and their eyes met. A shock, hardly distinguishable from the shock of an electric battery, made itself felt along Charles's spine. His heart leapt, the blood rushed to his face. The woman's face, already highly-coloured, deepened in shade and her eyes dilated.

Charles, without even asking himself, "What shall I do? Shall I stop and talk to her?" bowed instantly and passed on, but she turned too, and a hand fell, not lightly, on his arm. He had no

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choice then but to pause. The meeting seemed to him disastrous and horrible. He had wanted never to see Brenda again, and he was shocked and afflicted by this encounter. The very sight of her was painful to him. It wasn't that he hated her, for he didn't hate her, but it was a situation that he had long dreaded as a possible and even a probable one, people who have once lived together in matrimony or out of it being, as a rule, drawn together again somewhere, somehow, sometime.

"Well, Charles," she said, in her deep and rather loud voice, "I always thought this would happen one of these days. What are you doing here?"

"Seeing Chaumont," Charles said stiffly.

"I guessed as much, it may surprise you to hear." She was still handsome, he thought, though coarse. He was shocked and yet fascinated to discover, in her face, traces of both his daughters. The eyes were not unlike Venetia's; the mouth and chin, stubborn and decided, were not unlike Caroline's. Her eyes were fuller than Venetia's, more prominent, and infinitely harder, but he sought for the resemblance, even though it pained him, because seeing it, he saw Venetia. "What I mean is, what are you doing in France? Not living here, I don't suppose, a good Briton like you?"

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"I'm staying with friends, not far away." She dared to taunt him, even now, with that!

"Oh. I'm living, since you ask me, in rooms, in a house down below here, near the river. It's cheap and nasty. I'm poorer than a blind beggar's cat in these days. I don't suppose you want to hear my troubles, though."

"Not very much," Charles admitted. "Where is your husband?"

"Len died eight months ago, in Paris. I felt pulled down after all the nursing I did, and came here for a rest. My word, Charles, but we had a good time while his health was good and the money lasted. He got a bad lung, you know, and had to stop work. I was a good wife to him. I lived wherever it was good for him to live. I didn't know I had it in me."

"Nor I," Charles said.

"Len and I were happy together. You were too cautious and conventional for me. I couldn't stick it. The Bohemian life's what I like. You know, you can't pay the rent, so you get credit by asking twenty people in to dinner. It's been great fun, but neither poor old Len nor I could save a bob."

"It would have been like that if we'd gone on living together," Charles thought, with disgust. He asked:



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"Then you'll stay here for some time, I suppose?"

"Not if I can manage to get away. Look here, Charles. I've often thought of writing to you, through your blessed lawyers, and finding out if you'd be willing to give me a bit of help. I was pretty regular with the funds for the twins as long as the money held out, wasn't I?"

"I always disliked taking it," Charles said, more and more distressed by this interview, "but it couldn't be helped at first. Yes, you were conscientious, I suppose, in your fashion. You know, I think, that both my daughters are happily married?"

"Venetia too? She was the darker one. I knew Caroline had got off. I saw the notice in *The Times*. Fancy me thinking of bringing up a family. I'd never have stayed the course. Well, they're off your hands, now. I suppose you'll be thinking of marrying again yourself."

"I'm quite content as I am," Charles said warily. "What is it you want me to do for you?"

"I want backing. I want to get into some sort of business. A hat shop, I thought of, either in London or New York. London would suit me best. New York's too far away, and the competition's too keen in Paris."

"It seems a pity," Charles said, "that you didn't think of it earlier, while your husband was alive,

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and before you'd spent all you had. But I'll see what can be done about it. What is your address?"

She wrote it down for him on the back of a soiled envelope.

"Do give me a boost, Charles, there's a good chap. You can't have many expenses now that both the girls are married. And you always had quiet tastes. Len said if the worst came to the worst you'd give me a hand. He always stood up for you. He always said you were a damned good fellow."

"If I do this for you," Charles said, wincing, "and if you come to England, you must promise never to try to see me or either of my daughters. I make that an absolute condition. I must have your written agreement."

Her full brown eyes regarded him with some amusement.

"I'm not so crazy about you that I can't do without you, Charles. I've done without you for some time now. And I haven't altogether lost my looks, either. Once I get on my feet it's quite likely that I'll marry again. So don't you worry about that. As for the girls, I haven't got the mother instinct, as you ought to know. Are they pretty?"

"Very," said Charles, off his guard.

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"Well, they get that much from me, anyhow," she said.

"You'll hear from me in ten days or a fortnight," he told her. "I'll have to see Dowden and Ingalls. Are you hard up at this moment? I mean, can you pay your board here, for the present?"

She nodded.

"I don't want a loan. I want backing. I can bring it off, I'm certain I can. I know a lot about hats. I ought to, I've bought enough these last twenty years. Len always said I had the taste and looks of a Viennese, and you can't say more than that. Don't look at me now. I'm a sight."

Charles had nothing to say for the moment. He was fascinated by the fleeting resemblance he saw, while she talked, to Venetia. It amazed him that she could be so like her and so utterly unlike. Suddenly he saw her eyes fill with tears.

"Len and I loved each other," she said, and her mouth trembled. "You may not believe me, but it's the truth. I miss him—God, how I miss him!"

Charles was instantly moved and touched. This was sincerity. His eyes softened and he put a hand on her arm.

"I'm sorry. Very sorry. I'll do anything I can for you. I couldn't bear to see you unhappy or in difficulties, Brenda. I promise you I'll do

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what I can. I'm not a rich man, you know, so don't expect too much. It's fortunate that we met. I must go now."

He took off his hat and held out his hand. She took it, smiling through her tears. He saw how brown and dusty was the black crêpe that draped her hat, and how worn were her black kid-gloves.

"Good-bye, Charles. It's all my own fault, I know, and it's decent of you not to say so. I'll make good. You'll hear of Brenda Sweet one of these days as you hear of Reboux, or Suzanne Talbot."

"I don't know much about these things," were Charles's last words. He hurried away from her, in the direction of Ruggieri's room, his feelings lacerated. She had been his wife, and he only felt sorry for her, as he would have felt sorry for any lonely and penniless woman. She was the mother of Venetia and Caroline, he had loved her, his whole existence had been bound up in her, and now, as he widened the distance between them, he hoped, earnestly, that he might never have to see her again.

He wanted to tell Lydia of the encounter at the first possible moment. He was one of those men who dislike reticences or secrets in marriage, and fear them. He wanted to tell Lydia everything, he wanted her to tell him everything. Mar-

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riage, he thought, meant complete confidence and complete understanding, or it meant nothing at all.

He found Lydia admiring, with Grace, the small satin-brocaded bed that had once been the possession of the lovely Diane de Poitiers. Large bedrooms were not popular with the ladies of those days; they found it too difficult to keep them warm, Charles supposed. This one was small and crowded with furniture.

"I'm fascinated by this," Lydia said, taking his arm. "Nothing, of all a woman's possessions, makes her seem so real to me as her bed. Just think, her lovely head lay there."

Charles said he was thinking of all the other heads that had probably lain there, and then suggested that they go and look at the view from the terrace and admire the wide Loire. He wished he had asked Brenda how long she would remain in the château, as he felt it would be extremely inconvenient to meet her, but they didn't meet her. She must have gone home, he supposed, to one of those steep-roofed houses below, by the river. It interested him to find that neither Lydia nor Grace suspected that he had had anything in the nature of a shock or adventure. Queer, insensitive beings we are, he thought, entrenched behind our walls of flesh, able to communicate with each other only by

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words, noises. It was a clumsy business. He and Lydia loved one another; they ought to have been conscious of one another's feelings and thoughts. Wasn't it possible? Some day, he supposed, it might be. We were heavy, ponderous, unspiritual creatures at present. We went through life explaining ourselves painfully and elaborately by means of ingenious but inaccurate words, and when, at odd moments, we felt ourselves to be understood, it was like a glimpse of paradise.

By eleven o'clock that night he was in a fever of impatience to talk to Lydia about the meeting. The instant they were in their room with the door closed, he kissed the back of her neck and said:

"I saw another of my wives to-day."

"What on earth do you mean, Charles?"

"I saw Brenda."

"Brenda? Where?"

He told her.

"I came straight from her," he said, "to you, where you and Grace were, in Diane's room, still quivering, as you might say, with the shock, and you didn't notice anything."

"Well, my darling," Lydia said, "I don't pretend to be clairvoyant."

"Never mind," Charles replied. "It merely indicates to me that I shall be able to deceive you with the greatest ease and impunity."

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"Charles!" There were some subjects she hated to hear him joke about. "I believe you really feel hurt that I didn't know." She added: "I think I saw her. She was in the room a moment before. She looked like a Frenchwoman, and at the first glance one thought she was well dressed, but she was really rather shabby. She was in mourning."

"That was Brenda," he said.

"If she hadn't gone off with Leonard Sweet," Lydia remarked, "I shouldn't have been here now. I'm very grateful to her. Did you tell her you were married?"

"No," he answered.

"Why?"

"It was none of her business. And she would have asked a lot of questions. I wanted to say as little to her as possible. It was all too painful."

"My poor darling. But for some reason, I think I'd like her to have known you had married again. Still, if she comes to London, she's sure to find it out."

"How feminine you are, you nice creature," Charles said. "What do you advise me to do about setting her up in business?"

"You must do it, of course. But you must let me find half the money. I'd like to. I feel it's



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the least I can do for her. It will only mean a few hundred pounds, I suppose."

They discussed Brenda for an hour or more. Lydia said, finally:

"I thought I'd mind hearing of her, or knowing that you'd seen her, but I don't at all. I'm rather glad to know where she is and what she's doing. I'd often wondered."

"Mind you," he said, "she hasn't one particle of love or affection for me. She only wants to make use of me. Make no mistake about that."

"So much the better," replied Lydia.

"She deserves nothing from me," he said. "Nothing. But she is Venetia's and Caroline's mother, and she did send them money for a number of years. I can't forget those things."

"I should be disappointed in you if you did."

"Darling," said Charles, "I feel perfectly secure with you. You're so reasonable. I don't have to watch my step. I adore you. Not even marriage can mar the extreme pleasantness of our relationship."

She had taken off her dress, pulling it over her head in the way the women of this age do take off their dresses, and her hair came down in a pale shower as she emerged. She hung the dress up, and, slipping on her blue dressing-gown, began to brush her hair. Charles, examining her face, was aware that something was wrong.

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"Why are you looking like that? Have I said something you don't like? Yes, I see I have."

"You know you have," she said.

"You mean what I said about marriage? Lydia, darling . . ."

"Will you do me a favour?" she interrupted him, rather crisply.

"Only ask it, my beautiful one."

"Will you try to refrain from abusing and belittling marriage? Charles, I admit it's stupid of me, but when you do it, it hurts. I say to myself, 'I know he doesn't mean *our* marriage, now, but presently he will. It's only a question of time.' And it makes me feel unhappy, miserable. As though I'd trapped you."

"Lydia!" He flung his arms about her, and the brush fell from her hand. "What a fool I am! For God's sake, don't mind. I'm apt to go on doing it, however hard I try not to. These things say themselves. Please don't mind, my darling. It has nothing to do with us."

She kissed him.

"So you say, and I believe you, but I can't help being hurt. Your words are just like knives, and they stab me, here." She put her hand on her heart.

He was full of remorse.

"I'll try—I promise you I'll try. It's chiefly

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when I think of Brenda that I do it. That was a marriage, too. And what does it matter what I say about marriage, or what I feel about it, if I'm happy with you, as you know I am, my sweetest?"

"It only matters," she said, "because it hurts me, and I can't help its hurting. I feel the same stab of pain each time."

"If you could see what is in my mind!" he cried.

"But I can't. I can only hear the words you say."

"I'll fine myself ten pounds whenever I make a remark like that, and give the money to you," he suggested.

"That's no good. You'd enjoy giving me ten pounds."

"True. Lydia, darling, if I hear a man at lunch or dinner make a jest about marriage, it doesn't suggest to me that that man is unhappily married; it only suggests to me that he is the sort of man who likes to make a joke now and again. I judge the joke purely on its merits—and the man too."

Lydia considered this.

"I think any woman would feel as I feel," she said.

Charles had pulled her down beside him into the armchair. He kissed the palm of one of her

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hands, and then her wrist, gently and thoughtfully.

"If I were you," he said, "I would look at it this way. I would say to myself, 'This man I've married has a prejudice, rightly or wrongly, against marriage, and yet he is married to me and extremely happy. That is a personal triumph for me. If he had been the sort of man who inevitably marries someone because he likes the state of matrimony and wants to be married, I might have felt that he would have been equally happy with any one of a thousand women.' Do you see what I mean, fairest and loveliest?"

"Yes. But, Charles, the trouble is I've very little conceit. I don't say to myself, 'I *know* he's perfectly happy, so I don't mind his saying these things. They don't touch me.' I say instead, 'He can't be perfectly happy, or he wouldn't say them. There's something wrong somewhere. It must be my fault.'"

"Then you look upon my most casual remarks," suggested Charles, "as you'd look at the mercury in a thermometer; as though they registered the temperature of my love for you."

"That's it exactly," she admitted.

"How long will it take you to get over that? Because you've got to get over it, my cherished one."

"I'll have gotten over it," she said, half laugh-

ing, "when you've gotten over saying them, and not before."

"You stubborn devil," Charles said, kissing her. "Well," he said, "I'll try. I promise you I'll try, but you must arm yourself against occasional failures. And I shan't be nearly so amusing."

"I'm prepared to put up with that," she answered.

While Lydia slept he lay awake, thinking. His encounter with Brenda had stimulated his mind and brought back a thousand memories, not all of them painful, but made to seem so by the pain he had suffered later. His brain had gone drifting, like a ship that had slipped its cable in a storm. He remembered a hundred scraps of conversation more than twenty years old. He remembered, as though it had just occurred, the day Brenda had told him she was going to have a baby, and how suddenly frightened and distraught she had become. She accused him of cruelty; she said she would die, she knew it. She had cried and stormed hysterically. He didn't blame her for that. Not many women took it as, for instance, Caroline had taken it. But he had been given a glimpse that day of the vulgar and selfish woman she really was. He remembered introducing her to Leonard Sweet, and her saying, "Charles, I think you're too ready to speak to

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strangers. You don't know anything about this man." She, a Bohemian! Not, at any rate, while she was with him. And she had dared to say to him to-day, "Len always stood up for you. He always said you were a damned good fellow." And, "Not living here, are you, a good Briton like you?" He wondered that he hadn't been angrier. He was too utterly indifferent to her, he supposed, even to feel anger or disgust.

He thought what a darling Lydia was to have offered to find half the money. He had no intention of letting her, of course, but it was like her to have thought of it. So many women would have said, "Why should you help her? She's nothing to you now. Why should you spend money on her?" Lydia understood at once. In most ways he found her understanding infallible. If she had a fault it was her over-sensitiveness; but that was the inevitable defect, he told himself, of her qualities. In two days they were leaving St. Cyr and going back to London. Their married life would begin then, this enchanting honeymoon would be over. He vowed that he would keep her as happy as she was now; that never again would he say anything to make her imagine for an instant that he was regretting their marriage. Absurd and adorable woman. He told her twenty times a day how exquisite it was to have her near him. He decided that he

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liked her sensitiveness. It showed how aware she was of him, and how alert she was to notice slight variations of mood. She would soon, he thought, know him so well that to interpret them wrongly would be impossible, but until that time he must be careful. This alertness, he thanked heaven, wasn't all on one side. He, too, was watchful; he meant always to be watchful. He thought he knew what she was feeling almost before she knew it herself.

But it occurred to him that this mutual watchfulness, if carried too far, might prove something of a strain.



## *Chapter XVI*

**W**HEN they had returned to the house in Eaton Gardens, Lydia found, as she had expected, that changes would have to be made if they were to live there with any comfort. Charles's modest bedroom was too small for her, and had she decided to occupy it, his dressing-room would have had to be on the floor above, a most inconvenient arrangement.

"Shall we look for another house," she asked him, "or will you give up your library so that we can use it as a dining-room?"

Of two evils, said Charles, he preferred that one. He was deeply attached to that little house and hated leaving it, so Lydia didn't urge it, but for several weeks they lived the lives of the hunted, moving from room to room as the painters took possession. The drawing-room was redecorated and turned into Lydia's bedroom, Charles's bedroom became his dressing-room, the dining-room was turned into a drawing-room, and Charles's library did duty for the dining-room, with double doors between, which could be thrown open at other than meal times. Lydia had doubts

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about the success of these changes, but decided it would be worth trying.

They experimented at first with temporary servants, in the hope that Marie would return from Normandy, but she presently wrote that she had decided to marry the *propriétaire* of the small inn—famous for its cooking, she said—in her native village, and she hoped that Monsieur and Madame Lester would, in the near future, pay them a visit. Her letter was well written, dignified, and full of the pride she felt in her new position. Since her serious illness, she wrote, she felt she wanted to be among her own people. She would remember, however, as long as she lived, the kindness of Monsieur Lester, and she would never lose the deep affection she had for him and for Mademoiselle Venice. She hoped that he might find in his marriage “une vraie satisfaction.”

“That inn,” Charles said, “will be worth a visit one of these days.” But Marie’s failure to return was something of a blow to him, for she was a link with the past and he hated losing her.

Lydia lost no time in installing a competent English cook and two maids, who occupied Venetia’s and Caroline’s rooms, and for the first time in his life Charles knew what it was to have his clothes expertly attended to, his things laid out for him, and his every want fulfilled. There was

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little Lydia didn't know about housekeeping, though certain differences between English and American ways puzzled her at times.

Charles felt, secretly, that it was a little absurd for two people to be waited on by three. He almost hoped when Caroline came to see them that she wouldn't notice the presence of a housemaid as well as a parlourmaid. He couldn't see, on the other hand, that any good purpose would be served by asking one woman to do the work of two. If the work were light, so much the better. They were giving employment and a comfortable home to three people. He could see no objection to that. But it was a relief to him that Lydia didn't feel the need of a personal maid as well. Only the very wealthy had them in America, she explained. She herself had never had one, and was well able to manage without.

He soon felt the loss of his library, but that, he realised, was his own fault, as he had persuaded Lydia to give up the idea of a larger house. His books remained where they were, but his writing-table had to go to give place to a small dining-table, and he never went into the room to write any more because it seemed to him that no sooner was he settled with his papers than the maid came in to set the table. So he cheerfully put aside his anthology and devoted himself to Lydia.

He began to discover that there were far more

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things he liked doing than he had previously suspected. He found he liked dining out and going to a play. It gave him pleasure to see her dressed and ready in the evening, with bare, slim arms and shining hair and graceful gown. He enjoyed making her laugh. It amused him to see the effect she had on other people. He loved to think she was there, with him, for good. There was no danger, as there had been with Venetia and Caroline, of some day having to suffer the pain of losing her. And he was not one of those men to whom a thing possessed is a thing with its bloom rubbed off. She was a being to be studied, learnt, wondered about, questioned, and intelligently loved. The sight of her gloves or fur lying on a table, her dresses hanging up in their cupboard, moved him. His life seemed to him richer and more romantic. It was more arduous, perhaps, less placidly happy than when his daughters were with him, because love, after all, was a sort of battle, a sham battle perhaps, like the manœuvres of an army in peace time, but it required constant alertness and efficiency for all that.

Occasionally, when his work was not pressing, he came home at five and went shopping with her for half an hour or so. He learnt to his surprise that she hated shopping. It was a punishment to her to buy clothes, much as she enjoyed wearing them. It was an odious business, she said. Had

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she been very rich, rich enough to be eccentric, she would like to have found a double, a woman of the same size and shape and colouring, to whom she would pay a salary to choose her clothes for her, and be fitted, and go to shoe-shops and dress-makers.

"And whenever she made a bad mistake," said Lydia, "I'd deduct something from her salary, and when she pleased me very much I should raise it."

"What an evil job," commented Charles.

She read a great deal and studied French assiduously, for on their honeymoon she had been very much ashamed of her halting speech. The house took up a good deal of her time; she had a passion for flowers, and loved arranging them; and she went three times a week to a crèche to wash babies. She had asked Caroline what she could do, saying that she liked best to work for children, and Caroline had directed her there. She always made Lydia feel a useless parasite, although she, on her part, thought little of Caroline's activities. She admired her most for her energy and for a sort of hard goodness she had. There were other sorts of goodness she preferred, but at least it could be said for Caroline that, whatever her faults, she wanted little for herself.

Venetia's first letter since his marriage gave

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Charles great pleasure. It was written from their bungalow, "The Croft," Lucknow.

DARLING FATHER [she wrote],

Long before you get this you'll have wondered what it used to feel like not to have a wife, just as I often wonder what it was like not to have a husband. Did I really live and breathe and move and imagine myself to be happy before I married Clive? I suppose I did, poor purblind babe. And you, father darling, are a million times happier now; I know it. Lydia always seemed, from the very first, to be one of us. Do you remember that Sunday morning after you'd met her, when you told us we didn't know anything about America, and we tried to prove to you that we did? What fun it was. By the way, referring to what I said above, I don't want you to think I wasn't happy with you, because I was, of course, although in a very different way. But you'll understand all that. To continue, I thought that Sunday that you were rather thrilled with your Mrs. Chalmers, though I didn't say anything. I was too tactful. Clive liked her from the very first, so much so that it gave me, I remember, a nasty jealous twinge.

I long to see you together. How amusing it will be. What sort of a husband are you, I wonder? I hope Lydia will tell me. A darling, of course, but you'll have your little peculiarities. Even Clive has them. The latest one is that I'm not to rouge my lips. I don't mind here, as rouged lips and shorts don't go well together, but when I get back to London, if he's still of the same mind there'll be a battle. He's looking marvelously well and almost painfully good-looking, and so brown. I'm very brown too. Especially my knees. I love the life here. I find I get on very well even with



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people I don't like, and that's a valuable asset in a soldier's wife. I've been acting in a lot of amateur theatricals, which, of course, I adore.

Caroline's letters are full of Phil's activities. He seems to be doing a lot of speaking here and there. Do go and hear him some time, and tell me what he talks about, and if he's very red. She also told me that the offices of the *Daily Vanguard* were raided one day while she was there. It was in November some time. But she said that nothing was found that could possibly be used against them. Did she tell you this? If not, don't let her know that I told you.

Clive's Colonel is going to take us with him the next time he goes off duck shooting. I've been practising for weeks, and I'm not at all a bad shot, so Clive says I may have a try, bless him. He treats me like a reasonable being, just as you always did, but in addition he tries to make me believe I can do everything a little better than he can, and it makes me very humble.

Life, on the whole, isn't at all difficult here. Clive thinks I have taken to it with remarkable ease, but I don't think I deserve any credit for that. The native servants are good, my ayah a treasure, and the Punjabi Mahomedan "bearer," which as you doubtless know means "butler," is extremely efficient. So we've no worries. The little garden around the bungalow is quite pretty, and the gardener, who is of course a native too, brings me in roses for the house with great regularity.

We play a good deal of tennis at the Club, but we don't spend much time there otherwise as we find too many short drinks, chipped potatoes, and gossipy people somewhat tedious if taken in large doses. How you would hate the gossip! I'm longing to go to Agra and see the sights, the Taj Mahal and something or other Sikri—I



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can't remember its name at the moment—but Clive says we will all in good time. I know nothing about India, nothing, nothing, and thank goodness I realise it. I know a little about the army life here in this minute corner of it and that is all. But somehow the *feel* of the place, the atmosphere of it—hateful word!—soaks into one through the very pores of one's skin, so that if I felt like boring you, which I don't, I could write endless pages about it.

Write me lots of details about everything. Where and how will you live? Number Fourteen will be rather small for you now, I suspect, and if you want to give it up don't hesitate for sentimental reasons; because it was our old home, or anything of the sort. I'm so much happier about you. You can't think what a relief it is. Your letters have been wonderfully cheerful, and you wrote as though you were becoming or had become a sort of lounge-lizard or cake-hound, as Clive calls them, but it didn't deceive me at all. I know you too well. Tell Lydia that I will write to her soon and that I adore the idea of having her for a stepmother.

At first when I got your cable, I admit my feelings were rather mixed. I felt I had lost you, even while I thanked heaven you wouldn't be lonely any more. But the first feeling soon went. I know I haven't lost you, I know you'll be exactly the same, because people with characters like yours don't change. And I find it's easier to share you than I had thought it would be. I think you can trust men to divide themselves up fairly much more than you can women. Caroline, for instance, hasn't divided herself fairly at all. She's given nine-tenths of herself to the Robinsons, and has left us only one-tenth. I think I'm much fairer than that. It's fifty-fifty with me.

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There are no end of nice men out here, charming men, but I've found very few congenial women as yet. I'm obliged to confess that I'm glad it isn't the other way round. I find I like men far better than women, on the whole. I wonder if it's because I was entirely brought up by a man? Clive was talking the other day about the possibility of a sort of sex war, caused by the competition there is to-day, and will be, more and more, between men and women. I said if there ever were such a thing, I'd be the first woman to run up the white flag. "You," said Clive, rather rudely, I thought, "you'd hand over the keys, maps, ammunition and regimental plate before ever a shot was fired."

Well, I think this is all for the present. Kiss my stepmother for me. Thank goodness you didn't give us one earlier, while we were young and silly and intolerant—as I'm sure I should have been before I knew Clive—and when we might have resented it. And welcome her for me to Number Fourteen, if you decide to go there. She can do anything she likes with the house, as far as I'm concerned. I know she has perfect taste. See what a nice stepdaughter I am! Clive sends you both his love, and implores Lydia to leave her hair long. He says it will be a sight for sore eyes after the many inferior shingles to be seen here. He trims mine himself, so if he doesn't like it he has only himself to blame.

Adored parent, farewell.

Your loving and loveliest and favourite daughter,  
VENETIA.

Caroline sometimes came to lunch when she had a slack day at the office, and Phil came too when he could. They came by underground from the Temple Station to Sloane Square. They rarely

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journeyed into the "West End" by night, preferring the society of certain congenial spirits in Hampstead, and an occasional visit to the Everyman Theatre.

Caroline's clothes, even Charles observed, were deplorable. She made her own hats, and an impoverished woman friend in Hampstead now made her clothes with grateful but unskilled fingers. Lydia begged her to accept some of her hats, but with no success.

"I thought I liked myself in this," she would say, "but I see now that it doesn't suit me. It would suit you far better."

Caroline sweetly but firmly declined.

"Everyone should be able to make their own hats," she said one day. "After all, one knows one's own face best. Phil always prefers the things I make."

"But if everyone did that," protested Lydia, "what would become of all the thousands of girls and men and women in the millinery trade? They'd starve."

Caroline said it was too large and complicated a subject to go into just then. Well-to-do people imagined, or liked to believe, that they were acting for the best when they spent money for luxuries, but if they ceased to demand luxuries, thousands of people would be released for more important work.

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"They'd be released to walk the streets," said Lydia, "or so it seems to me."

Caroline explained that the changes that were coming would necessarily mean a tremendous amount of hardship, but that the workers themselves were ready and willing to face it in order that future generations might profit.

"That sort of altruism," said Charles, who was listening, "rarely flourishes on an empty stomach."

"You don't realise," Caroline told him, "the strength of purpose and the nobility and the self-sacrifice of the workers. You imagine that men—and women too—will only sacrifice themselves when you put them into a uniform and send them out to kill or help to kill their own kind. But there are other and better causes, and the workers know it."

"For people who hate war," said Charles, "you're extraordinarily warlike. The only war you seem to disapprove of is the patriotic war. Any other sort has your approval and support. You're damned inconsistent. Force is only permissible when it enables you to get something you want. For a country to seize territory is wrong; for a certain class of people to seize the property of another class seems to you right. Quite possibly it was seized in the first place, but you can't

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be so childish as to argue that two wrongs make a right."

"We're no worse than you," said Caroline. "We think it right to fight for some things, wrong to fight for others. If you can take it upon yourselves to say what things men may fight for and even kill for, why shouldn't we? And our aims are far wider and finer."

"It's all cant," said Charles, "either way. Nothing that's built on hate can succeed."

"People are sluggish, and ready to live and die in their troughs, for the most part," Caroline observed. "Instil hate into them and you set them in motion. Governments do it when they decide to make war. That's propaganda."

"I see no hope in you or in people like you, Caroline darling," Charles said. "You copy all the old errors, you cling to all the old evils. 'You do it, why shouldn't we?' you say. You take all our old sins and use them for your own ends and make virtues of them. What's wanted is a new spirit, but it isn't in you." He added: "My politics are boiled down to this; I would like everybody to be able to keep clean and smell nice. If I went into Parliament, my platform and battle-cry would be, 'Bath-salts for all.' But how best to go about it I don't know."

"Pretty, but unconstructive," remarked Caro-

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line, but it had made her smile, a thing she too seldom did.

She accepted from Lydia with eagerness a layette for her baby. She simply hadn't time, she said, to make baby clothes, and they were so expensive to buy. She thought them, if anything, rather too fine. She liked things to be plain, but good. Nevertheless, she accepted them gratefully and gladly.

"I envy you," Lydia once said when they were alone. "I wish it were happening to me."

"But won't it perhaps?" Caroline asked.

Lydia shook her head.

"I think it would be rather ridiculous for Charles to have a young family now."

"I don't see that at all," Caroline protested. "And if you're thinking of Venetia and me, I can assure you we wouldn't mind in the least. Why should we?"

Early in January Mr. and Mrs. Robinson went to Canada. Mr. Robinson had a brother there who had lately been stricken with partial paralysis, and as they had been separated for twenty years, he and his wife decided to go to Alberta to see him. Caroline said she hardly knew what she would do without "Mother Kate and Father Lewis," but that they had planned to come back before her baby was born.

Charles heard a good deal from her about their

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trip, and what they thought of Canada and the industrial conditions there. He wasn't much interested in anything the Robinsons thought or said, but he listened with a good grace. He never argued with Caroline nowadays, and avoided all mention of politics. He thought she was putting far too great a strain upon herself. She went daily to the office, doing a considerable amount of housework before she started—they had a daily "help," a stolid young girl called Miss Lightfoot—and she often cooked the dinner, with Phil's help, on her return. Phil was often away from London, giving talks here and there, generally to miners and workmen's clubs. Charles read some of his speeches and found they were intended to be educative rather than provocative, but he thought them on the whole unsound and unhelpful. While Phil was away, Miss Lightfoot slept in the flat so that Caroline shouldn't be alone. Charles's only criticism was that Caroline couldn't be doing herself any good by climbing the stairs of the office and the underground, and saw no reason why she couldn't continue her writing at home.

"If you protest," Lydia said to him one night as she dressed for dinner, "you'll only drive her to greater extremes. She's determined to prove that women can do men's work, nature or no nature." She added: "I've got a secret admira-



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tion for Caroline, foolish as I think she often is."

"So have I," admitted Charles. He had finished dressing, and now sat smoking and watching Lydia do up her hair. "She's a courageous young woman, and still only twenty-one. Think of it."

"I know," said Lydia. "When I was twenty-one I hadn't an idea of my own. I had never read anything but books like the 'Dolly Dialogues,' and Henry Seton Merriman's novels, and I thought I was rather advanced because I liked Kipling. I even let my mother choose my clothes."

Charles laughed at this.

"As a young girl," she went on, "I wore long, clinging skirts, and did my hair in an immense pompadour, with a sort of stuffing inside it. A rat I think we called it. We never discussed divorce, and my mother taught me that legs should be called limbs. I wore very tight gloves and tight shoes, and a high collar with little, uncomfortable bones in it that ran into my neck. The only thing I can remember to my credit is that I wore the first 'peek-a-boo' waist to be seen in Buffalo. That was a blouse with some lace let into it, and it created quite a scandal."

"You darling," said Charles. "Tell me some more."

"When I think of Venetia," she said, "I could cry with pity for myself. Edward and I were

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polite and friendly with each other, but we were both, I think, a little ashamed to show our real feelings. Anyway, we never did. If anyone ran away with anyone else's wife or husband, we never talked about it. We thought sex was a subject best left alone. Even after I was married, I wore nightdresses with long sleeves and high necks, made of the very best handkerchief linen, of course. Silk underclothes were hardly thought of. And I spent my time going to young women's luncheon parties and teas for engaged girls, and we never talked about anything but each other, and what we thought of this young man or that."

"Well, you're a very satisfactory product now," Charles said.

They dined at home the next evening before going to the play. Charles had had a very trying day at the office, and a very busy one, and he came home tired. He went, from sheer force of habit, straight into the room that had been his library and was now the dining-room, and he realised with something of a shock that he had temporarily forgotten his own marriage, and the changes it had made. It was late, and he hurried upstairs to dress for dinner; and thinking it would merely amuse Lydia, he told her of his slight mental aberration and the surprise he had had at not seeing his writing-table in the library. She didn't

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say very much, and as he had a bare twenty minutes in which to dress, he was too much occupied to notice her silence.

They sat down to dinner at a quarter to seven—a barbarous hour in Charles's opinion, but he agreed that it was better to do one's hurrying before dinner, and eat in comfort. He didn't realise how tired he was until he was seated at the table. He told Lydia that he was sorry they were going out, and she offered to give up the theatre and stay at home, but he wouldn't hear of it. He'd probably feel better after dinner, he said. They talked in a broken and desultory way. Charles said a number of things that happened to come into his mind. He said them in that challenging and half serious way he had, throwing back his head and giving utterance to them as a sort of protest against the universe. He was clearly overtired and somewhat out of sorts—a state of things so rare with him that to Lydia it seemed ominous and catastrophic. She told the maid to telephone for a taxi at ten minutes to eight, and said they would have their coffee in the drawing-room. As they were drinking it, some teasing devil prompted her to say:

"I think a woman needs to have a very thick skin to live with you, Charles."

"My dear Lydia, you talk as though I were a sort of human porcupine." He added: "I've

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hurt your feelings somehow. What have I done? I can tell by the expression of your mouth."

"You said to-night . . ." she began, but he interrupted her.

"My darling, you're not going to tell me that you've taken something I've said literally?"

"You said to-night," she went on, "within a space of twenty minutes, first, that the Lord little guessed, when he created them male and female, how he was complicating an existence that would otherwise have been simple and pleasant, and then, that in spite of all the struggles and difficulties you had, the happiest time of your life was when the children were little. Am I to believe you mean those things, Charles dear, or not? Because if you do mean them . . ."

"I apologise for the first remark," said Charles, "on the ground that it wasn't very amusing. I can make much better remarks than that when I'm in good form. The second was, I suppose, true in a way. I think you would say, Lydia, that the happiest time of your life was when you had Robert. But I wish you'd remember that the things one says at a given moment are only worth listening to, if they ever are, at the moment when they are said. It all depends, you see, on the context. And on the mood," he added.

She refastened some artificial carnations on the shoulder of her dark red dress.

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"I can't help remembering the things you say," she admitted, "especially when they hurt me. Balzac says somewhere that observation springs from suffering, and that our memory only registers what gives us pain." She dropped her arms. "I'm afraid that's true, in a way, of me, Charles. You make me so happy, and yet so miserable at times. I argue with myself, I call myself imaginative and over-sensitive and a fool, but I profoundly believe that you regret your marriage. I do, dearest, and it tortures me."

Charles, with a grave face, went to her and took her in his arms.

"You've got a complex," he said.

"Yes." Her eyes filled with tears.

"I don't know what it comes from, or how to deal with it. I'm completely in the dark. Do you know what it comes from?"

"No," she lied, "I wish I did."

"Well, will you try to find out?"

"Yes."

"Search your mind. There must be a reason somewhere. There's something worrying you, or frightening you. I'll have you psycho-analysed if you don't do it yourself. Do you honestly believe I regret having married you?"

"Yes, honestly, at moments. Not all the time."

"That's something. Is it, by any chance, because you regret having married me?"

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"No, no," she cried, with passion. "I've never regretted it for an instant. I adore you."

"Is it because I used to swear I'd never marry again, like the fool I was, and still occasionally make acid comments about marriage?"

"Yes, partly, only partly. But I feel you still——"

His kisses cut short what she was going to say.

"There's only one thing that can make me regret I married you. And that is the knowledge that I'm not making you happy."

She clung to him, and cried:

"Yes, I know, I know. And that applies to me, too."

"Your doubts," he said, "do me no credit, my lovely one."

"I'd give anything, anything, not to have them. Oh, I wish we were the age of Venetia and Clive, with nothing behind us, with no memories, or prejudices."

"I don't," he said. "I wouldn't be young again for anything in the world. I like what you are. I want you to like what I am. I want you to know what I am, to be certain of me. When will you know me, so that you won't have these doubts?"

"Do we ever know anyone?" she asked, pressing her cheek to his.

"Yes, yes," he answered. "A thousand times

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yes." They heard the maid's step in the hall, and drew apart. "We won't go to the theatre to-night," he said. "We must have this out. If the taxi's come, we'll send it away."

"I think it's the telephone," said Lydia. "I heard it ring."

The maid came into the room and addressed herself to Charles.

"Miss Lightfoot has just sent a message from Mrs. Robinson, sir, asking you to please come at once, as Mrs. Robinson is ill. And she says, have you seen the evening papers, sir?"



## *Chapter XVII*

THEY found the doctor already with Caroline. She had been asking for her father, he said, and after a whispered talk in the hall he took Charles into her bedroom. Lydia, left alone in the living-room, as Caroline called her combined dining and drawing-room, again looked at the evening paper.

She read for the second time :

Colliery Explosion in Durham. Eight Miners Trapped. Rescue Party Also Trapped by Falling Tunnel.

The article went on to say that one of the rescue party, Mr. P. L. Robinson, had been giving a lecture to the miners the night before. He had paid a visit to the mine at ten o'clock that morning and was about to return to London when the explosion occurred. He at once volunteered to go to the assistance of the entombed miners and joined the rescue party, which was formed within a few minutes. They were nearing the scene of the explosion when the falling of a tunnel cut off those members of the party who were in the rear

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from those in front. Frantic efforts were being made to reach both the rescue party and those they went down to help, but grave fears were entertained . . .

She put aside the paper, unable to read any more. She sat listening to the sounds in the next room, and wishing that Charles would come and give her news of Caroline.

It was very cold, and she drew her chair nearer to the practical and unbeautiful gas-fire, and held out her cold hands. Over the mantel was a picture of Caroline, painted by a girl friend who was an art student. She had seen Caroline's complexion as red-brown with vivid green shadows, and her hair as chrome yellow, but she had caught, by some odd chance, her look of youthful hardness and rebellion. On the opposite wall was a still life painted by the same hand. It represented a half loaf of bread, two onions and a cauliflower grouped upon a table that was covered with a checked tablecloth, and seemed outside the laws of perspective. It was a neat, cottagy room, and had plain distempered walls, sunproof curtains and covers, a couch or sofa that looked as if it could be inverted into a couch bed if required, and a round centre table.

She heard Miss Lightfoot's step in the hall and sprang to her feet. She beckoned the girl into

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the room and asked her, in a low voice, to tell her what had happened.

Mrs. Robinson, Miss Lightfoot told her, had read the news of the colliery accident as she was coming home from the City in the underground. She had fainted, or nearly fainted. A kind woman had helped her out at her station, had given her something to revive her at a chemist's, and, with the aid of the chemist's assistant, had brought her home. It was all most unfortunate, Miss Lightfoot said gravely, under the circumstances. She had rung up the doctor and Mr. Lester at once, and they were expecting a nurse at any moment. The doctor had wanted to take Mrs. Robinson to the hospital, but she had objected so strongly that he had had to give in to her.

"She wants to be here," Lydia said, "in case there is news of her husband."

Miss Lightfoot was very fair, almost an Albino, and her hair was cut like a Dutch girl's, square and straight. She seemed a sensible and competent young thing, the daughter, probably, Lydia thought, of a mechanic or of a poor professional man. It was difficult to classify her. She looked a bare seventeen, but Lydia guessed from her manner that she must be older. The bell rang then, and she went downstairs to the street door to let in the nurse.

Five minutes later Charles came in the room.

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He was pale, and his eyes looked restless and troubled.

The poor child, he said, was suffering horribly, and was racked with anxiety about Phil. Her baby might be born at any time during the night. He was going out to the underground station presently to telephone to one of the newspapers in the hope of getting further news. He intended to stay at the flat all night, of course.

"Now that the nurse has come," he said, "there'll be nothing for you to do, Lydia, so I think you had better go home. They're giving Caroline morphine now, thank God." He walked to the window and looked out, and then turned back. "This is a ghastly business. I've made fun of Phil, and I wish now I hadn't, though I realise it's illogical and absurd to feel that way. The fellow has courage. He's done a foolishly brave thing. Perhaps he oughtn't to have done it. Perhaps if he'd stopped to think of Caroline, he wouldn't have done it. I don't know. But it's terrible for her."

Lydia begged him to let her stay too. She didn't want to go home alone, she said. She knew she wouldn't sleep.

But Charles wouldn't hear of it. He presently went out with her and put her into a taxi. He kissed her and thanked her for coming with him and said he would ring her up in the morning

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early. When she was driving home she thought that she had never found him more lovable than now, in his double rôle of father and mother. She envied him because Caroline, in her trouble, needed him so desperately.

Their little after-dinner scene—if it could be called a scene—had completely gone from his mind, and for this she was thankful. She was ashamed of it, and she vowed that after this she would keep her hurts to herself. It was a little after ten when she reached home again, and as she opened the door she thought of the night, nine months ago, when she had first gone there to dine, and had met Phil on the doorstep. She had little guessed that she would one day be opening that door with her own latch-key. All that was such a short time ago, and yet since then her life and all their lives had been completely changed.

She rang for the maid and asked her to bring her some hot soup and some toast, for the thought of Phil's and Caroline's suffering made her feel faint and miserable. She drank the soup and felt better, but exceedingly wide awake, and she presently went to the piano and tried to quiet her nerves by singing and playing. She had taught herself to read accompaniments, and she had a small, clear voice. She never sang unless she was quite alone, but it gave her great pleasure and a

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feeling of duality as well, as though she were at the same time artist and audience. Before she knew Charles she had thought she had a nice taste in music, but she found that Charles didn't look upon music as an agreeable noise, but as something which required, or should require to be worth listening to, a certain intellectual effort.

She went over, several times, a song of which she was very fond—Roger Quilter's "To Daisies," with Herrick's words: "Shut not so soon, the dull-eyed night has not as yet begun . . ." and it soothed and quieted her. She presently returned to the fire, thinking of Charles and missing him. Her life with him, short as it was, had been full of sharp joys and pains. She compared it to her life with Edward, with its placid routine, broken by a single tragedy, and its uncritical, unintelligent relationship, like that of two travellers who know each other and the journey too well to talk.

She admitted to herself that she would rather spend one year of happiness and uncertainty with Charles than ten years of placidity and mental and emotional inertness with anyone else, provided she could convince herself that he derived almost as much satisfaction from their life together as she did. But her pains and doubts were becoming increasingly sharp and insistent. They had been married only a few months, and although he was

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the most charming and considerate and satisfactory of husbands, she found it impossible to believe that he was not playing a part which required continual watchfulness and effort, and that he was not, in reality, regretting his freedom. It was this thought that was constantly nibbling at her mind, destroying her content and the happiness of their joint life. Those caustic comments of his were thrown off almost automatically, she believed, by the discontent and rebellion in his spirit. This sharing of his life, she told herself, was irksome and distasteful to him. His desire to be alone at times—a desire with which she readily complied—was an added proof to her that this dual life to which he had been so long a stranger tried him unbearably.

The fault was entirely hers. She had taken the same view in regard to marriage that her mother had taken—that it was the natural thing, the inevitable thing, to marry. A purely sentimental viewpoint, she now told herself, and if a rule, one to which there were many exceptions. Charles was one of them. She hadn't believed his frequently repeated assertion that he didn't want to marry again because she hadn't wished to believe it. She had thought it a mere attitude, an amusing gesture, a sort of defence; for a man who is so clearly fair game needs some such defence in a world full of women. The egoist in her had



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said, "It isn't you he wants to defend himself against; he would be happy with you." She had longed to make him say, "You were right and I was wrong. The only possible happiness lies in marriage." She had looked into the future and seen some such sweet victory. She had pictured a close-up, she told herself ruthlessly, of their two blissful faces, and then a slow fade-out. Disgusting! She tore herself to shreds. She was ready to admit that she was her mother over again, full of false and sentimental generalisations.

Charles had been exquisitely happy with his daughters. Their leaving him had thrown him temporarily off his balance, but left to himself he would gradually have readjusted himself to his new conditions, and would have made for himself in time the sort of life that really suited him.

And she, because of her own loneliness and lack of a definite purpose in life, and because Charles interested her and pleased her more than other men, had deliberately brought about his downfall, first by lulling him into a wholly false sense of security, and then by suddenly and unexpectedly revealing her love for him. At that point she could bear her thoughts no longer, and picking up her wraps she turned out the lights and went upstairs to bed. She rarely prayed, or rarely assumed the attitude of prayer, but to-night she felt

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a childlike and desperate need of it. Her chief thought was for Phil and Caroline, both in imminent danger, but she urgently desired her own and Charles's happiness as well, and she presently got into bed feeling somewhat comforted. As she lay there in the dark, words of Charles's, caresses, little jokes, endearments, looks, came back to her, and she told herself that she was a fool to doubt, and the tears came to her eyes. He did love her and need her; she had expected, unreasonably, to make him happier than it was possible or natural for a man with a mind like his to be. She had not tricked him into marrying her, or, if she had, it was the best day's work she had ever done. To this thought she clung with hungry tenacity, and believing that she had never been farther from sleep, she slept.

The ringing of the telephone bell woke her at seven the next morning. She reached out to the small table beside her bed and lifted the receiver to her knee. It was Charles, as she had expected. His voice sounded tired and anxious.

"The news isn't any too good here," he said. "Caroline's baby, a boy, was born at four o'clock this morning. He's doing well enough, but Caroline isn't, poor child. She's very ill. It's this getting no news about Phil."

Lydia implored him to let her do something, but he assured her there was nothing she could

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do. He had lied to Caroline; he had told her that the rescue party were alive and well, and that the people who were trying to reach them could hear them talking.

"It's made a difference," he said, "so I shall go on lying." He added, "There's one thing you can do, if you will. Telephone to my office for me and tell them I won't be there to-day and may not be there to-morrow. I've asked for a consultation, and Wyndham Brooks is coming this morning. The nurse seems all right—a very capable woman."

"What's the baby like?" Lydia asked.

"A horrible little thing. All redness and thin howls. My God, why do people marry and bring these troubles on themselves? My poor Caroline!"

He was speaking from the underground station, he told her. He asked Lydia if she had slept. He hadn't slept at all, but he didn't care. He said he would telephone again after he had seen Wyndham Brooks.

Lydia got out of bed and twisted her long hair up into a knot before going to her bath. A ghastly day for everyone was in prospect. She could do nothing. She thought of hiring a car and going to Durham and awaiting events there, bringing Phil back as soon as he was released, but she soon discarded the idea. If Phil were saved,

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everything would be done for him on the spot that could be done. Doctors and nurses would be waiting. And he would far rather, she felt sure, travel back by train.

She sent flowers to Caroline knowing well enough they would not be allowed in her room, but the sending of them afforded her some pleasure. She knew Charles was going through a miserable and anxious time, and she grieved for him, but she felt he might have omitted to say, "Why do people marry and bring these troubles on themselves?" She wished, fervently, that he had omitted to say it.

At four he telephoned again to say that what he had told Caroline that morning was now true. The digging was going on rapidly, voices had been heard and shouts of encouragement. He said that Caroline was by no means out of danger, but that there was a distinct improvement. The baby—he supposed they would call the little horror Charles—seemed a good specimen of its kind.

"Anyhow," he said, "they'll never make a conscientious female citizen out of it; that's one good thing."

He intended to spend another night on the couch bed, and would be home, if all went well, on the following morning. Lydia felt that it was ironical and paradoxical that she, the only one

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who had experienced what Caroline was experiencing, should be able to do nothing.

The next morning he telephoned again to say that he had heard from a friend on the *Daily Express* that the rescue party had been rescued, but that they were suffering from extreme exhaustion, as they had been working, until their strength gave out, to get through to the miners. It would be an affair of a few hours only before they too were reached. Phil, Charles said, was unconscious when found, but he thought there were no serious injuries. Caroline showed some improvement, but had begged him not to leave her, so he would spend one more night on that sofa.

"The only one who isn't worn out," he said, "is my grandson."

Phil came home the next day, entirely unaware until he reached the flat, that he was a father. He looked very pale, ached in every joint and muscle, and was suffering from a scalp wound. But Caroline, he said, had gone through far more than he had. His emotion at the sight of her and of his child was almost too much for him.

"I've named him Charles," said his father-in-law, to whom this scene was peculiarly painful, "but you can change if it you like. I don't insist."

He was worn out when he returned to Eaton Gardens, and slept for fourteen hours. Caroline

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was entirely out of danger; she was weak but inexpressibly happy. The strain, however, had been great, and it had told on Charles's nerves.

"I feel every inch a grandfather," he said.

Caroline's illness, the baby, and the medical attendance required for some time by Phil was going to cost the young couple, Charles knew, far more than they could afford. Phil told him he didn't see how they could pay the doctor's bill for at least two years.

"People who can't pay doctors' bills shouldn't rush into matrimony," was Charles's mental comment, but he wouldn't have dreamt of saying it to Phil. Mr. and Mrs. Robinson had just enough to live on, and their trip to Canada was a great extravagance. And as Charles greatly preferred that the young couple should turn to him for help, he insisted on the bills being sent to him. His income was not large, and the financing of Brenda in her hat-shop in Albemarle Street had cost him more than he had anticipated. He was obliged, therefore, to sell some shares to cope with this second demand upon him, and when Lydia heard of it she was very indignant.

"Are you never going to let me feel I'm not a stranger or an outsider?" she asked. "You know how glad I'd be to help. I wanted to find half the money for Brenda, but you wouldn't let me. I think it's unkind, Charles."

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"Brenda happens to be my particular burden," Charles replied, "and your money, my dear, is yours, left to you by Edward. If you like to spend some of it for our mutual pleasure, that's one thing, but I don't propose to let you set my first wife up in business or pay my son-in-law's debts with it."

"I suppose it's partly because of your first marriage that you feel this sensitiveness about money," Lydia said.

"I don't admit I'm sensitive about it," Charles answered. "I'm merely reasonable and just. My burdens are my own. Besides, in the case of Phil, I like doing it. It's a small sign of my appreciation of his courage, exceedingly ill-timed though it was."

But Lydia said to herself:

"The fact that I have money of my own, as Brenda had, is only an added annoyance."

Caroline got back her strength slowly, but the baby, Charles Philip, made rapid progress, and Lydia often went to Hampstead now that Caroline was better and took care of him while the nurse went out.

One day Caroline said to her:

"Are you quite happy with father, if that isn't an impertinent question?"

Lydia, knowing that Caroline had few reticences herself and not very much patience with



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them in others, was not altogether surprised at her having asked it. She answered her, as casually as she could:

"Happy? Of course I am. What made you ask?"

"You haven't seemed so happy lately. I wondered if you were homesick, perhaps."

"Not a bit. I don't think I've ever been homesick."

"Well, homesickness for a certain country is a thing I can't understand," said Caroline, "but that's because I've no national feelings. We all live under the same sky, we're warmed by the same sun, we all have the same needs and the same emotions. If I had Phil and the baby with me, one country would be just the same as another to me. I think all human beings of equal importance and equal interest."

"I'm afraid I don't reel like that at all," said Lydia, "but certainly I've never felt homesick in London. In Paris I have. I hope," she added, "I haven't seemed unhappy."

Caroline was silent for a moment.

"I often wonder," she said, "how married people get on who haven't some tremendous mutual interest. Some strong tie, I mean, that would have kept them together even outside of marriage."

"Such as . . ." Lydia prompted her.

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"Such as Phil and I have."

"Are you suggesting," Lydia asked, smiling, "that your father and I haven't anything of the sort?"

"Well, you haven't a common aim, or purpose, have you?"

"I don't know what you mean exactly by an aim. We have a great deal in common." Then thinking she saw the drift of Caroline's words, she asked quickly, "Does that mean you think your father seems unhappy? Or not as happy as he might be?"

"I think," said Caroline slowly, "that he would be far happier if there were something in which he was deeply, vitally interested. I'm sorry he stopped work on his anthology. That was better than nothing."

"But he hasn't definitely stopped it. You see, as the house is arranged now there isn't a room for him to write in, comfortably. I wish there were. Then," she pursued with a feeling of dread, "you *do* think he doesn't seem very happy?"

Caroline had no idea that anything hung on this question. She had a passion for pointing out the aimlessness of other people's lives, and she was now indulging it. She wanted everybody to have a serious Aim, and it really distressed her that her father had none.

"I wouldn't say that," she said, "but it seems to me he's lost a certain zest and enthusiasm that he used to have."

"He is working very hard at the office just now," said Lydia.

"What I mean is," began Caroline, but just then a cry from Charles Philip interrupted her. She listened to him for a moment, and when Lydia started up to go to him she restrained her.

"That's a peevish cry," she said. "I shan't take him up. He must learn that he can't get what he wants that way."

Lydia preferred not to return to the subject, and went home feeling that she had had one more proof of the fact that Charles was regretting his marriage. Other people saw it now. It was the most desperate blow her pride had ever received. Their life together was still a novelty, and already Charles was feeling the strain of it. The outlook was not a pleasant one for a proud and sensitive woman. What would he be feeling two, five, ten years from now? He was not to blame. He was what he was; a man who craved isolation and solitude. She had imposed upon him, in her optimism, a life for which he was not suited. She could blame no one but herself.

They were dining that night with Antoinette Brewer and her old friend Sir Walter Pickering, the artist. He had just been knighted—an

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honour he had never desired—and was a deservedly distinguished man. He was sixty and very tall, had fine features, curly grey hair, and a short grey beard. He dressed with extreme care, looked like almost anything but an artist, and looked it deliberately. He had married at an early age a common little woman who made his domestic life a farce, but he bore it patiently and humorously, consoling himself with the friendship of women like Miss Brewer. That lady had been heard to say that living alone had no terrors for her provided she was in no danger of dining alone, and this she very rarely did, for she enjoyed an immense popularity.

Charles and Sir Walter Pickering had the same light-hearted and cynical way of expressing themselves, and when they were together their talk was apt to become extravagant and fantastic. Life, they agreed, was either to be wept over or treated satirically, and they preferred to treat it satirically. Lydia was amused and entertained by Sir Walter, but Charles's remarks seemed to cut nearer to the bone, and hypersensitive as she had now become, they made her wince. She was in no mood to discount anything that he might say.

They dined in a grill room before going to the play, and their table, which was in an alcove, was an unusually large one for four. Miss Brewer, looking across at Charles, commented on the fact.

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"It's a married people's table," Charles answered gaily. "It's intended to keep them from laying violent hands on one another."

Sir Walter was ordering dinner, and gave this small jest no attention. Miss Brewer, throwing back her cloak, merely remarked that it would have to be even larger to accommodate some of her friends. But Charles had no sooner spoken than he was at once conscience-stricken. It was the sort of thing he had sworn not to say. He looked quickly at Lydia. She was speaking to Sir Walter, and there was no sign in her face that she had minded.

"She's got over all that," he said to himself. "I knew she would. She understands me better now."

And in that happy belief he gave free rein to his fancies.

## *Chapter XVIII*

**C**HARLES received a letter from Venetia not long after this, containing the surprising news that Clive was to be sent home for a course at the Staff College, and that they expected to leave India the following October.

"If he hadn't been the studious and hard-working darling he is," wrote Venetia, "this wouldn't have happened. I love the life here, but by next October I shall have had enough. Just think, father, only eight months more and I shall see you again. It's too marvellous. It's rather a secret at present, the news having been, as you might say, whispered in Clive's ear, but he said I might tell you. It will suit him far better. He's got an active brain that wants plenty to do; and this has cheered him enormously."

Charles was in a perfect ecstasy of delight at this news. He had tried to accustom himself to the thought that he would be separated from Venetia for at least two and a half years unless he should decide to go to India. He said to Lydia:

"There's nothing on this earth that I would rather have had happen, short of the millennium."

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Charles's devotion to his daughters had never caused her the least jealousy. It was one of the things that had first attracted her to him. This news of Venetia's gave her almost as much pleasure as it gave him, but at the same time she realised that even if she had not married Charles, his loneliness, which had seemed to her so distressing, would not have been of very long duration.

She was convinced that his protestations of love and of happiness were merely to spare her pain. She believed he said to himself, and would continue to say to himself, "At least I will keep her from knowing the truth about it as long as possible." She no longer confided in him; she hid her doubts and brooded over them, perfectly well aware that her pride would not allow this state of things to go on much longer. A climax must come that would either destroy such dubious happiness as she now enjoyed, or else clear her mind once and for all of the doubts and regrets that were torturing her. She alone was responsible for this state of affairs, and she alone could end it. There appeared to her to be only one possible solution to her problem, and that lay in flight.

She would go back to New York. Whether she ever returned or not depended entirely on Charles. If he wanted her he would have to come for her. He would have to convince her, once



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and for all, that he liked living with her better than living without her.

Once conceived, this idea seemed to her practical and sound. It simplified the whole question. It boiled it down, so to speak, to this: if he wanted her, he would come for her. If he preferred a solitary life, she would remain in New York. There would, of course, be no question of a divorce, as neither of them would ever want to marry again. There need be no scandal. They could explain the situation to their friends; and no one else mattered. Charles could say, to explain her departure, that she had gone back to see her mother; or, what was more probable, that she had been obliged to go to look after her property there. And as Charles had never been to New York and had often expressed a wish to do so, it would be natural enough for him to follow her and bring her back—always supposing that he wanted her to come back. If he failed to persuade her that he did, they could decide on some other course of action—a course that she couldn't and didn't attempt to visualise. But at the same time she meant to make her second surrender as difficult as her first surrender had been easy and rapid.

Her opportunity came late in February.

Charles was obliged to go to Edinburgh on business, and Edinburgh was, for Lydia's pur-

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poses, a convenient distance from London. He left on a Tuesday morning, to return on Thursday. A boat train left London at eight-forty-five on Wednesday morning, and by Wednesday night the *Olympic* would have sailed. Lydia went, a sorrowing and anxious conspirator, to the offices of the White Star Line, and had no difficulty whatever in obtaining a state-room. In fact, the case with which this was accomplished seemed to her a decidedly good omen. No one, seeing her occupied in making these arrangements, would have guessed that she was in a state of extreme mental and emotional agitation. She seemed, as ever, composed and calm. Her outward appearance was perfect in every detail and gave no clue to the turmoil in her mind. Her shoes fitted her slim arched feet like gloves, her clothes were exquisitely suitable for a February morning in London, little wings of fair hair showed on either side of her simple and charming hat, and she carried the most carefully chosen, the neatest and most serviceable of handbags. But her mind, all this time, was a veritable battle-ground for contending armies. Love, pride, doubt, humiliation, self-pity, tenderness, recklessness, an anxiety to leave everything in perfect order and cause as little disturbance as possible by this step she was taking; a longing to shock, to frighten Charles into a complete and final realisation of what she was to him,

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whether it be nothing or everything—all these things were struggling in the arena of her thoughts.

She went home and told the servants that she was obliged to go out of town for a few days and wasn't sure when she would be back. It was possible that she might be detained, and they would, of course, take their orders from Mr. Lester. She packed a steamer trunk with the help of the housemaid, who was slavishly fond of her, and all those bright bottles that Charles liked to see on her dressing table went into her travelling case. She had few jewels, for she cared little for them, but those she had she put into a small jewel case. She was ready by ten o'clock Tuesday night. When she asked herself if she expected to return to that house she was obliged to admit that she did, and as a much happier woman. She wrote a note to Caroline and said that her father would explain her absence.

She then sat down to write the inevitable letter to Charles. She told him she would only explain her actions fully if and when he came to New York for her. She was leaving him not because she didn't love him, for she did, she adored him, but because he had never succeeded in persuading her that he didn't regret his marriage. If he wanted her, he must come for her. She wouldn't return otherwise.

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She sealed it, wrote "For Charles" on it, and laid it on the writing-table in the drawing-room beside the note for Caroline. She looked about her and satisfied herself that everything was in perfect order. Things would go on quite smoothly without her, for a considerable time at least. She went into the dining-room, once Charles's library, to see what sort of a night it was. She could see a few stars. The light shone out on the bare branches of the fig tree, which would soon, she thought, be putting on green again. The sight of it moved her, for Charles was fond of it, and she drew down the blind and went upstairs to her room, passing her trunk which lay ready in the hall. She meant to put the labels on it when she reached the station, for she didn't want the servants to know her real destination.

She slept lightly but not badly, and when her breakfast was brought up at half-past six she woke feeling rested, and, strangely enough, with no remorse or regrets, but full, instead, of a sense of adventure and excitement.

But when she was in her bath a most unwelcome and disturbing thought came to her. It struck her, for the first time, that history was repeating itself, and that she was doing almost what Brenda had done. Extraordinary as it now seemed to her, she had never once thought of Brenda while she was writing that letter to

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Charles. She had completely and entirely forgotten her. And now the thought that she was about to do, twenty years later, what Brenda had done, was extremely distasteful to her. She was not, of course, doing it in the same way or for the same motives. Brenda had gone off with a lover, and with no intention of returning. The two things were completely different. And yet . . . they had both written him a letter of farewell, they had both taken advantage of his absence to slip away. That a man should twice in his lifetime be the recipient of such a letter seemed, to Lydia, grotesque. And yet she saw that it was unavoidable. She wished there were some other way, but she could think of none. She felt that the writing of that letter put her somewhat on a level with Brenda, and she felt humiliated and ashamed. Still, she had made up her mind to go, and she couldn't go without leaving some word for him. And after all, it was as different from Brenda's letter as it could well be. All the same, she could picture Charles's face as he picked it up and read it, and she weakened.

But everything was ready. The entire household was prepared and ready for her departure. It was better, it was necessary, that she should now carry the thing through. She dressed briskly, her courage returning to her. At least she could soften the letter a little. As soon as she was

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ready she went downstairs and ripped it open, adding at the bottom of the last page, "I'm miserable at leaving you, I love you so much, and it's because I love you so much that I am doing it."

She sealed it up again and replaced it, still dissatisfied. But the maid had already telephoned for a taxi, and she went into the hall and waited for it, drawing on her gloves and feeling excited and nervous. She gave a few last instructions.

"Don't forget to order some new electric light bulbs for the lamp in the drawing-room. You'd better get half a dozen. And pack the silver teapot carefully and send it to Mappin and Webb's to have the dents taken out. Mr. Lester will give you the address, or you'll find it in the telephone book."

It was a cold, rainy morning, and the rain had sleet in it. Lydia thought it would have been impossible to start on a more discouraging day. The maid stood by the door looking for the taxi, an open umbrella in one hand and Lydia's travelling-case in the other. Lydia herself, wearing her fur coat, carried a rug over her arm, and her jewel case. She glanced at her wrist watch and saw that it was time to start. At that instant, at eight o'clock exactly, a taxi drew up at the door.

"Here it is," she said with relief, and was about to descend the steps when the maid exclaimed:

"Why, it's Mr. Lester, madam," and advanced,

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holding the umbrella over her head, to open the door for Charles.

Lydia felt a sort of paralysis seize her. She literally couldn't move. Charles had already seen her and waved his hand, and she saw his look of surprise at finding her up and ready to go out so early. Also he had already observed her travelling-case, in its familiar purple cover, in the maid's hand, and in another minute he would see her trunk. She knew she was lost. There was nothing for it but to face him as best she could. She went into the drawing-room, her knees trembling, and sat down by the unlighted hearth. She didn't even trouble to conceal the letters that stared at her from the writing-table. It was no use, she felt, concealing anything. She formed no plan. The situation had now got beyond her and would have to take care of itself. She only felt a desire to laugh, hysterically, but she had a horror of hysteria and controlled herself, sitting rigidly upright in her chair. She heard Charles come into the room. He went straight to her and, putting a hand on her shoulder, bent down and kissed her.

"Lydia, darling, is anything wrong? Where were you going? Has anything happened?"

The maid came into the room.

"Your taxi's here now, madam," she said.



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Lydia opened her purse and took out some money.

"Give him this," she said, "and send him away. I've changed my plans."

Charles looked at her strangely, took off his coat and flung it on a chair. His face had suddenly paled and altered. He went to the fireplace, and bending down, put a match to it.

"What made you come back to-day?" Lydia asked him in a low voice, avoiding his eyes.

He went to the door and shut it.

"The man I went to Edinburgh to see," he answered, speaking perfectly naturally, "died very suddenly yesterday of heart failure. I arrived at half-past six last night, heard the news, dined, and took the ten-fifty back. I got to King's Cross at seven-thirty this morning." He went to the writing-table and picked up the letters. "What are these?"

She made no answer, nor did she move. He looked at them, started to open the one addressed to him, then changed his mind and tossed it on the table. He came back to her, looked at her very closely, and took her hands. They were like ice, and he rubbed them. She was shivering.

"Lydia, where were you going?"

She shook her head.

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"Read that letter," she said. "Read it, please."

"I don't want to read it. What does it say?"

"Read it."

"No."

The maid opened the door.

"Would you like your trunk taken upstairs, madam, and unpacked?"

"Leave it where it is for the present," Charles said. When the door was closed again, Lydia looked at him, and his face frightened her. His movements and his manner, however, were gentle. He sat down on the arm of her chair and drew her towards him. He took off her hat, threw it aside, and kissed her hair. His mind, she knew, was working furiously, and his actions gave her no clue to his thoughts.

"Lydia, where were you going, and why? Tell me."

"Oh, read that letter," she cried, despairingly. "Read it!"

He reached out for it, captured it, and without another look at it, put it on the fire. He held her against him, silently, looking over her head.

"Answer me, my darling. Where were you going?"

Tears started into her eyes then, and she pressed her face against his coat to hide them.

"To New York."

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"Why?"

"You know why."

"I have no idea. Tell me."

"I couldn't bear to live with you any longer, knowing that you regretted it."

"Regretted what?"

"Regretted marrying me."

There was a moment's silence, during which her tears were running down her cheeks.

"I don't understand what you mean, Lydia. I might have imagined any reason in the world but that one. I don't know what you mean."

"You regret having married me. You regret having married at all. Charles," she cried, loosening his hold upon her, "ever since the first few weeks I've realised how you regretted it. You've tried to hide it, but you couldn't. I couldn't bear it any longer. You don't know what torture it's been. It's been agony, agony." She was sobbing now. "If you'd read my letter . . ."

"You dared to write me such a letter," he said passionately. He controlled himself almost immediately. "Never mind now. Only I think you might have spared me that." He got up from the chair. "Lydia, this is almost incredible. I believed we were two extraordinarily happy people. What do you mean by saying I regret our marriage? You seem to me to be talking

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wildly, insanely. I find it impossible to understand you."

"I have been terribly unhappy. I believed you hated being married to me. I had to find out."

"So you were going away. How would that have helped?"

Lydia flung out her hands in a sort of despair, as though her belief in her own actions, in her own rightness, was going from her.

"Oh, Charles, my darling, you don't know what I've suffered. I had to find out. I believed that if I went away you'd discover for yourself whether you really wanted me to live with you or not, and that if you did, you'd come for me. I was counting on that. I wanted you to come and persuade me that I was wrong. I wanted you to make me believe you wanted me."

"Have I ever made you believe I didn't want you?"

"Yes, yes. I have good reasons to think it. Oh, Charles, listen to me, listen to me! Whenever there was an opportunity for a jibe at marriage, you took it. You've always known how that hurt me, but you couldn't stop. You had to give expression to your real feelings, and those were your real feelings. You hated being married again, you resented it. Wait, listen to me. It's all my own fault. I don't blame you, I blame myself. You never wanted to marry. I knew it,

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and yet I married you. I shouldn't have done it, but I loved you, and I thought you'd be happy."

"Happy?" he cried. "Happy? But I am. As happy as any man can be."

"Oh, so you say, because you feel you must say it. But the truth comes out without your realising it. It comes out at odd moments, when you're talking to other people, and when you're off your guard. I've pretended lately that I didn't mind. I haven't said anything. But I've minded terribly. If the circumstances had been different . . ."

"What circumstances? What do you mean?"

She said, desperately:

"You've always said I had a complex. Well, I suppose I have. I thought you'd understand it without my telling you; it's not pleasant to have to tell you."

His anger was dying out. He came back to her chair again, and bent over it.

"Lydia, my darling, if you've got the slightest excuse for being the dirty dog I think you are, I may forgive you. If not I swear I'll send you away whether you want to go or not. What is it? Tell me."

She put her hands on his knees. She looked straight into his eyes.

"You never had the slightest intention of marrying me, until I gave myself away."

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"What do you mean by giving yourself away?"

"Exactly what I say, Charles. It was the very last thing in your mind. That day I came here, on your birthday . . ."

"Yes, yes, I haven't forgotten it."

"You were going to say you wouldn't see me any more. You practically had said it. And then you asked me what my feelings were, and I gave myself away. I told you I had fallen in love with you. Let's be honest with each other, even if it's for the last time. You never intended to marry me, or anyone else. I practically forced you to. How can you wonder, then, that I've suffered when you've railed against marriage, how could I help applying the things you said to you, to us? How could I help believing that you meant them?"

Charles said quietly:

"It's true that I didn't want to marry. I never tried to hide that. I didn't want to run the risk of another such note as you have just written me, or such a note as Brenda wrote. The very thing I feared and dreaded has happened. But I loved you; I told you so. I have never ceased telling you so. And when you said you loved me, like the angel you were, I believed you, and I put all those old feelings behind me for ever. As for my remarks, regarding matrimony, I thought we had settled all that. I

thought you understood. I've been a charming husband to you. I've been the most exemplary and delightful husband. I've been a model for all husbands, and without half trying. Deny it if you can, Lydia, you devil, you devil."

He got up and walked about the room, twisting his lock of hair.

"Brenda left me, Caroline left me, Venetia left me, and now you've practically left me. It was to avert some such final blow, some such foul blow, that I tried to avoid matrimony. My God, Lydia, I married you because I was so certain of your fairness, of your common sense, of your . . . your decency. And because I loved you so much that I was willing to put up with matrimony, yes, even matrimony, to get you."

"Oh, Charles, Charles!" She ran to him, and put her arms about his waist, under his coat, and pressed her face against him. "Don't, don't. I can't bear it. It's because I loved you so much that I was going. Can't you understand what it's like to live with someone you believe would rather live alone? It was only to find out, to make sure. I believed you'd come for me. I wanted you to come and say you wanted me. Thank God you came home when you did. In one more minute I'd have gone, and I didn't want to go. . . ."

"I'm not sure you won't go still," he said.



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"Do you want me to go?"

She dropped her arms, and went back to her chair. Charles stood by the mantel, looking at her, and there was very little in his face to show her what he was feeling.

"You may decide to go when you've heard what I have to say. I don't mean to change my ways in the least. I don't admit that I did or said anything that I shouldn't have done or said. A certain amount of freedom of speech is absolutely necessary, both politically and domestically. You needn't expect a penitent husband, because I don't feel like one. If I'd come five minutes later, and found your note, I'm damned if I'd have come after you. Or if I did, out of curiosity, I'm damned if I'd have brought you back with me after hearing your reasons. They're perfectly futile."

"They're not futile. I've been miserable. I've suffered agonies of doubt and uncertainty."

"Well, people are far happier, really, when they're happy and miserable, than when they're only happy. And you can't deny that you've been happy, part of the time. Deny it, Lydia, if you dare, and look me in the face."

"I've been terribly happy," she cried, "when I haven't been wretched."

"Fortunate woman. Thousands would envy you."

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She burst into tears.

"Charles, you infuriate me. And you make me feel a fool."

"I want to," he answered, apparently unmoved.

She sprang up, her handkerchief to her eyes, and ran toward the door, but he barred her way.

"Lydia, suppose I'd gone to Canada or India, and left a note for you?"

"Do you want me to go or stay?" she cried.

"Which do you want to do?"

"I want to hear you say you want me to stay."

He put his arms about her and brought her back to the fire again.

"If I were given to generalising," he said, "I would comment on the terrible unfairness of women. I have hurt you by a few chance words that were never meant for you, and you retaliate by offering me a cup of cold poison. And you ask me to beg you to stay."

She dried her eyes.

"If I've hurt you intolerably," she said, controlling her voice, "if I've spoilt our marriage, I'll go."

"Lydia," Charles said, speaking as though he hadn't heard her, "if I were a woman and could choose between marrying a man who disliked marriage, disliked its ties and its rather terrible permanence, and its appalling difficulties, and re-

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alised them all, and yet wanted to marry me; and one who accepted the institution of marriage as he accepted the weather, unquestioningly, uncritically; or looked upon it as a sort of haven, or feather-bed, I would without a moment's hesitation marry the first. I tell you, Lydia, what I've often told you before. I dreaded marriage, and feared it. It's only the young who don't. I said to myself that I couldn't and wouldn't risk a second failure, because the first one had made me suffer too much. But you had suffered too, though in a different way. I thought that with the experience we each had had we could make something of this marriage. And to me the attempt so far has been adorable, enchanting, far, far more delightful than I would have dared to hope."

She put her hand over his mouth with a cry of pain.

"Don't, Charles, don't. I can't bear any more. I've spoilt it. I'd better go. Let me go!"

"Tell me your grievances, first," he said. "Every one of them. A woman doesn't buy a steamer ticket unless she's been tried pretty far. State your case. It shan't be said that I've condemned you without a hearing."

"I can't," she cried, "if you stand there like a judge. You must come here."

He came and sat, once more, on the arm of

her chair, and waited. After a moment's silence, she exclaimed:

"No, I can't. All the doubts and miseries that possessed me are gone now. I can't recapture them. I don't want to remember them. But I can assure you I suffered so horribly that I welcomed the thought of any sort of release—death or separation, anything. And you may be as perfect a husband as you say you are, but I swear to you, Charles, that now, this morning, is the first time you've really made me believe you don't want to live without me."

He caught her close to him.

"Lydia, I adore this marriage of ours. I adore you for loving me like that and for being hurt by me. It's exquisite and wonderful. If you'd gone, I think it would have killed me. Let me say I hate marriage now and then, because it helps me to realise what a glorious exception ours is. Every happy marriage is an exception, darling Lydia. Remember that. It isn't nine o'clock yet, and I've travelled all night, or I could think of better things to say to you, but I'll say them yet. I'll say them again and again. I adore you for caring so much that you nearly left me. It'll make me very humble and very angry whenever I think of it. Say you love me, and forgive me."

She said it, passionately.

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"No more misunderstandings," said Charles. "At our age, surely, they're avoidable. If youth knew, if age could," he quoted. "Well, middle-age knows and does, thank God. A perfect state of things. And now let's have breakfast."

THE END.

(6)

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**Heart of the Desert.** Honore Willsie.

## THE BEST OF RECENT FICTION

- Heart of the Hills, The. John Fox, Jr.  
Heart of the Range, The. William Patterson White.  
Heart of the Sunset. Rex Beach.  
Heart of Unaga, The. Ridgwell Cullum.  
Helen of the Old House. Harold Bell Wright.  
Her Mother's Daughter. Nalbro Bartley.  
Her Pirate Partner. Berta Ruck.  
Hidden Places, The. Bertrand W. Sinclair.)  
Hidden Trails. William Patterson White.  
High Adventure, The. Jeffery Farnol.  
His Official Fiancee. Berta Ruck.  
Honk. Doris F. Halman.  
Honor of the Big Snows. James Oliver Curwood.  
Hopalong Cassidy. Clarence E. Mulford.  
Hopalong Cassidy Returns. Clarence E. Mulford.  
Hopalong Cassidy's Protege. Clarence E. Mulford.  
Horseshoe Robinson. John P. Kennedy.  
House of Intrigue, The. Arthur Stringer.  
House of the Whispering Pines, The. Anna Katherine Green.  
House on the Downs, The. G. E. Locke.  
Hunchback of Notre Dame. Victor Hugo.  
Hustler Joe and Other Stories. Eleanor H. Porter.
- Illiterate Digest, The. Will Rogers.  
Immortal Girl, The. Berta Ruck.  
In Another Girl's Shoes. Berta Ruck.  
In a Shantung Garden. Louise Jordan Miln.  
Indifference of Juliet, The. Grace S. Richmond.  
Inevitable Millionaires, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu. Sax Rohmer.  
In the Brooding Wild. Ridgwell Cullum.  
Inverted Pyramid. Bertrand Sinclair.  
Invisible Woman, The. Herbert Quick.  
Iron Trail, The. Rex Beach.  
Isle of Retribution, The. Edison Marshall.  
I Want To Be a Lady. Maximilian Foster.
- Jacob's Ladder. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
Jean of the Lazy A. B. M. Bower.  
Jimmie Dale and the Phantom Clue. Frank L. Packard.  
Johnny Nelson. Clarence E. Mulford.  
Judith of Godless Valley. Honore Willsie.
- Keeper of the Door, The. Ethel M. Dell.  
Kent Knowles: Quahaug. Joseph C. Lincoln.  
Keziah Coffin. Joseph C. Lincoln.

# THE BEST OF RECENT FICTION

Kilmeny of the Orchard. L. M. Montgomery.  
Kindling and Ashes. George Barr McCutcheon.  
Kingdom of the Blind. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
King By Night, A. Edgar Wallace.  
Knave of Diamonds, The. Ethel M. Dell.  
Kneel To The Prettiest. Berta Ruck.  
Knights of the Desert. W. D. Hoffman.  
Knights of the Horseshoe, The. Wm. A. Caruthers.

Ladies of Lyndon, The. Margaret Kennedy.  
Land of Forgotten Men. Edison Marshall.  
Land of Mist, The. A. Conan Doyle.  
Last Trail, The. Zane Grey.  
Laughing Girl, The. Robert W. Chambers.  
Law Breakers, The. Ridgwell Cullum.  
Leap Year Girl, The. Berta Ruck.  
Leave It to Psmith. P. G. Wodehouse.  
Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat to His President. Will  
Rogers.  
Light That Failed, The. Rudyard Kipling.  
Limping Sheriff, The. Arthur Preston.  
Lister's Great Adventure. Harold Bindloss.  
Little Pardner. Eleanor H. Porter.  
Little Red Foot, The. Robert W. Chambers.  
Little Ships. Kathleen Norris.  
Little White Hag, The. Francis Beeding.  
Locked Book, The. Frank L. Packard.  
Lone Wolf, The. Louis Joseph Vance.  
Long Live the King. Mary Roberts Rinehart.  
Loring Mystery, The. Jeffery Farnol.  
Lost World, The. A. Conan Doyle.  
Loudon from Laramie. Joseph B. Ames.  
Luck of the Kid, The. Ridgwell Cullum.  
Lucky in Love. Berta Ruck.  
Lucretia Lombard. Kathleen Norris.  
Lummo. Fannie Hurst.  
Lydia of the Pines. Honore Willsie.  
Lynch Lawyers. William Patterson White.

Madame Claire. Susan Ertz.  
Magic Casket, The. R. Austin Freeman.  
Maid-at-Arms, The. Robert W. Chambers.  
Major, The. Ralph Connor.  
Man and Maid. Elinor Glyn.  
Man from Bar-20, The. Clarence E. Mulford.  
Man from El Paso, The. W. D. Hoffman.

## THE BEST OF RECENT FICTION

- Man from Smiling Pass, The. Eliot H. Robinson.  
Man from the Wilds, The. Harold Bindloss.  
Mare Nostrum (Our Sea). Vicente Blasco Ibanez.  
Martin Conisby's Vengeance. Jeffery Farnol.  
Mary-'Gusta. Joseph C. Lincoln.  
Master Criminal, The. J. Jefferson Farjeon.  
Master Mummer, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
Master of Man. Hall Caine.  
Master of the Microbe, The. Robert W. Service.  
Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes. A. Conan Doyle.  
Men Marooned. George Marsh.  
Michael's Evil Deeds. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
Mine With the Iron Door. Harold Bell Wright.  
Miracle. Clarence B. Kelland.  
Mischief Maker, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
Money, Love and Kate. Eleanor H. Potter.  
Money Master, The. Gilbert Parker.  
Money Moon, The. Jeffery Farnol.  
Moonlit Way, The. Robert W. Chambers.  
More Tish. Mary Roberts Rinehart.  
Mr. and Mrs. Sen. Louise Jordan Miln.  
Mr. Grex of Monte Carlo. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
Mr. Pratt. Joseph C. Lincoln.  
Mr. Pratt's Patients. Joseph C. Lincoln.  
Mr. Wu. Louise Jordan Miln.  
Mrs. Red Pepper. Grace S. Richmond.  
My Best Girl. Kathleen Norris.  
My Lady of the North. Randall Parrish.  
My Lady of the South. Randall Parrish.  
Mystery of the Sycamore. Carolyn Wells.  
Mystery Road, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
  
Ne'er-Do-Well, The. Rex Beach.  
Net, The. Rex Beach.  
Next Corner, The. Kate Jordan.  
Night Hawk. Arthur Stringer.  
Night Horseman, The. Max Brand.  
Night Operator, The. Frank L. Packard.  
Night Riders, The. Ridgwell Cullum.  
Nina. Susan Ertz.  
Nobody's Man. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
No Defence. Gilbert Parker.  
North. James B. Hendryx.  
  
Oak and Iron. James B. Hendryx.  
Obstacle Race, The. Ethel M. Dell.

## THE BEST OF RECENT FICTION

Odds, and Other Stories. Ethel M. Dell.  
Old Home Town, The. Rupert Hughes.  
Oliver October. George Barr McCutcheon.  
One-Way Trail, The. Ridgwell Cullum.  
On the Rustler Trail. Robert Ames Bennet.  
Orphan, The. Clarence E. Mulford.  
Owner of the Lazy D. William Patterson White.

Padlocked. Rex Beach.  
Paradise Bend. William Patterson White.  
Pardners. Rex Beach.  
Partners of the Tide. Joseph C. Lincoln.  
Passer-By, The, and Other Stories. Ethel M. Dell.  
Passionate Quest, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
Patrol of the Sun Dance Trail, The. Ralph Connor.  
Pawned. Frank L. Packard.  
Pawns Count, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
Pearl Thief, The. Berta Ruck.  
Peregrine's Progress. Jeffery Farnol.  
Peter Ruff and the Double Four. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
Phantom Wires. Arthur Stringer.  
Phyllis Anne. Florence Ward.  
Pine Creek Ranch. Harold Bindloss.  
Poisoned Paradise, The. Robert W. Service.  
Pollyanna; "The Glad Book." (Trade Mark.) Eleanor H. Porter.  
Pollyanna of the Orange Blossoms. (Trade Mark.) Harriet Lummis Smith.  
Poor Man's Rock. Bertrand W. Sinclair.  
Poor Wise Man, A. Mary Roberts Rinehart.  
Portygee, The. Joseph C. Lincoln.  
Postmaster, The. Joseph C. Lincoln.  
Power. Arthur Stringer.  
Power of the Glory, The. Gilbert Parker.  
Prairie Flowers. James B. Hendryx.  
Prairie Mother, The. Arthur Stringer.  
Prairie Wife, The. Arthur Stringer.  
Pretender, The. Robert W. Service.  
Prillilgirl. Carolyn Wells.  
Prodigal Son. Hall Caine.  
Profiteers, The. E. Phillips Oppenheim.  
Progressive Marriage. Bonnie Busch.  
Promise, The. J. B. Hendryx.  
Purple Mask, The. Louise Jordan Miln.  
Purple Mist, The. Gladys Edson Locke.









